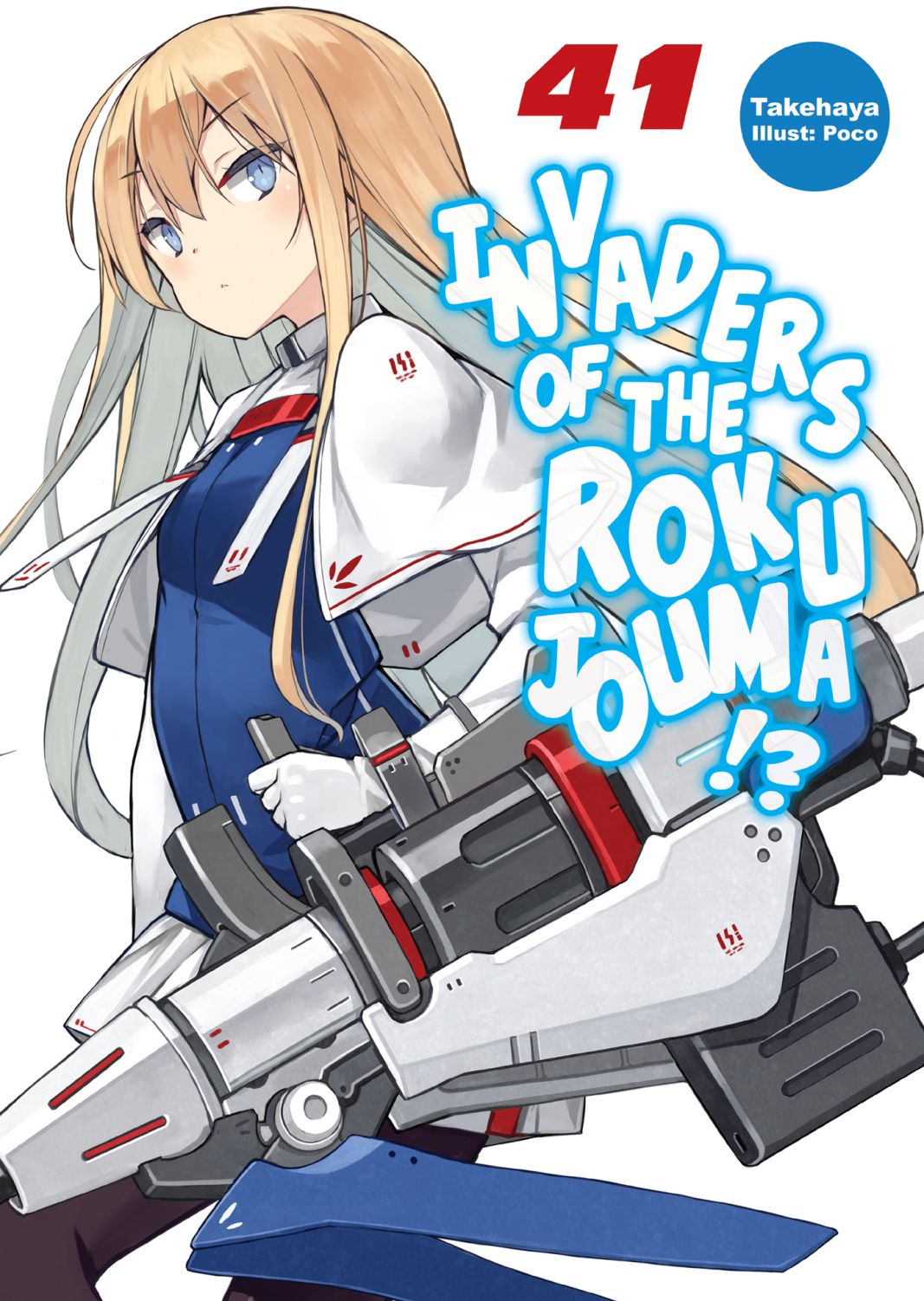


41

Takehaya
Illust: Poco

INADERS OF THE ROKU JUMA !?





41

Takehaya
Illust: Poco

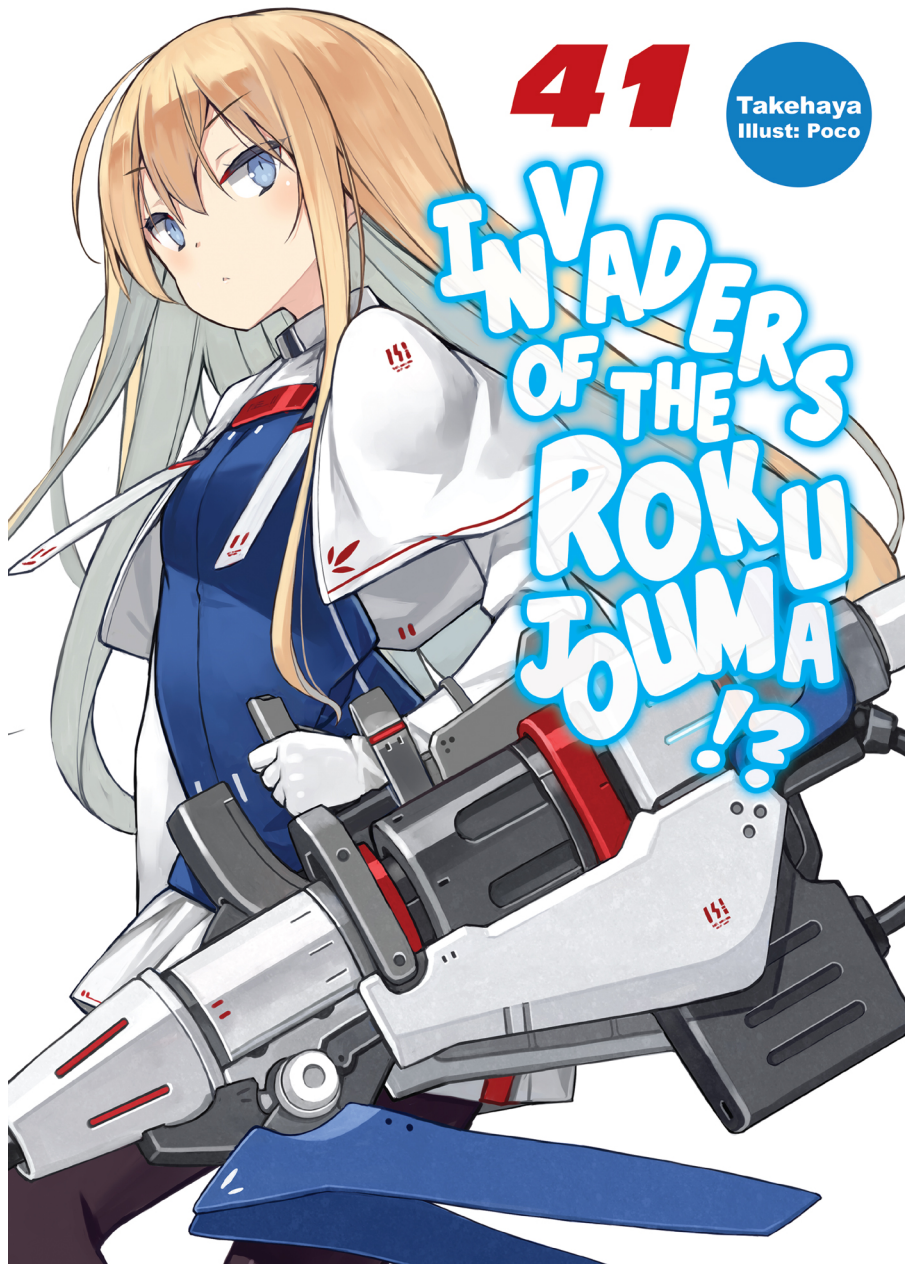
INADERS OF THE ROKU JUMA !?



41

Takehaya
Illust: Poco

INADERS
OF THE
ROKU
JUMA
!?





KOUTAROU WIPED THE GRIN OFF HIS FACE AND STOOD BOLT UPRIGHT. HE THEN GAVE ELFARIA A CLEAN SALUTE.

"IMPERIAL GUARD CAPTAIN LAYOUS FATRA VELTLION REPORTING FOR DUTY."

"WELCOME, LORD VELTLION. WE HAVE MUCH TO DISCUSS."

THE FORMAL ATMOSPHERE DIDN'T LAST. THEY BOTH BURST OUT LAUGHING WITHIN SECONDS.

"WAHAHAHAHA! YEAH, THIS REALLY DOESN'T SUIT ME."

"IT FEELS SO SILLY TO BE SO SERIOUS WHEN IT'S JUST THE TWO OF US. HEEHEE."



**“GOOD LUCK,
PARDOMSHIHA.
I’LL BE PRAYING
FOR YOUR
FORTUNE.”**

**“THANK YOU!
RUTHKANIA NYE
PARDOMSHIHA IN
WARLORD III-REV
YELLOW LINE...
TAKING OFF!”**

**A PROUD KNIGHT HEADS
FOR THE FRONT LINE!**



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Saturday, September 24th

To Forthorthe

Saturday, September 24th

The Blue Knight's Return

Sunday, September 25th

The Cause of the Uproar

Thursday, September 29th

Ralgwin's Miscalculation

Thursday, September 29th

Technical Issues

Tuesday, October 4th

How It's Put to Use

Afterword

FACTIONS MAP



KASAGI SHIZUKA

Koutarou's classmate and the landlord of Corona House.

Alunaya the Fire Dragon Emperor resides within her.



KURANO KIRIHA

Heiress of the underground who's finally found her beloved. With her quick wits and big heart, she's a master of both tactics and love.

UNDERGROUND DWELLERS (OF THE PEOPLE OF THE EARTH)



SATOMI KOUTAROU

Our protagonist, and the formal tenant of room 106.

Also the Blue Knight.



MATSUDAIRA KOTORI

Kenji's little sister, but you'd never know it. An introvert through and through. She's now enrolled at Harukaze High.



MATSUDAIRA KENJI

Koutarou's best friend-cum-partner in crime. He can be a bit tasteless, but he's a good guy at heart.

KOUTAROU'S CHILDHOOD FRIENDS



AIKA MAKI

A former member of the evil magical girl group, Darkness Rainbow. After bonding with Koutarou, she's now a loyal member of the Satomi band of knights.

MAGICAL GIRLS

(OF THE MAGICAL KINGDOM OF FOLSARIA)

NIJINO YURIKA

The Magical Girl of Love and Courage, Rainbow Yurika. She's a walking disaster, but she's grown into a magical girl who really makes it count when she needs to.



RESIDENTS OF CORONA HOUSE



GHOST FORM



HIGASHIHONGAN SANAЕ

The ghostly girl that used to haunt Koutarou. She now has her body back, however, and is more energetic than ever before.

GHOSTS



RUTHKANIA NYE PARDOMSHIHA

Theia's retainer and assistant. She's extremely happy to be able to serve the master she so admires.



THEIAMILLIS GRE FORTHORTHE

Princess of Forthorthe and the Blue Knight's liege. She's blossomed into a wonderful leader, but she's still quick to pick a fight.

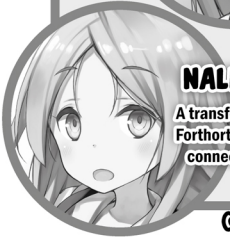
CLARIOSSA

DAORA FORTHORTHE

Koutarou's partner during his adventures in past Forthorthe. She's still growing, both as a princess and as a scientist.



PRINCESS ALAIA



NALFA LAREN

A transfer student who's officially come from Forthorthe, but it seems she shares a special connection with Koutarou and company...



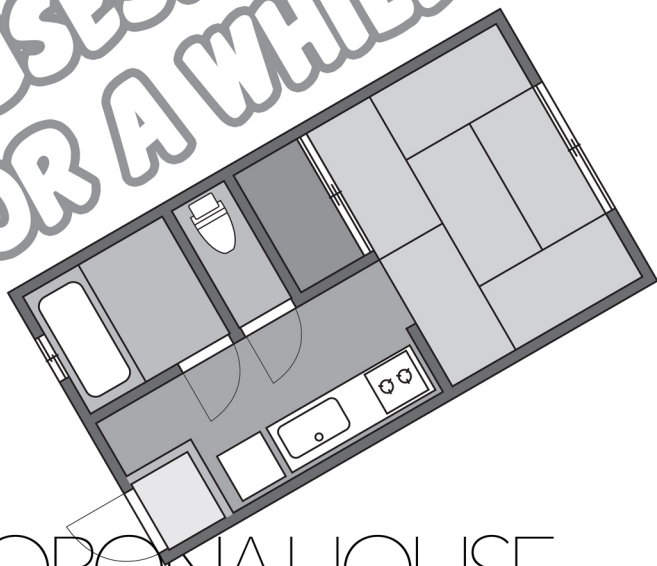
SAKURABA HARUMI

The reincarnation of Princess Alaia, whose soul travelled two thousand years through time to be with her special someone. She's currently happy to be living a normal life alongside him.

ALIENS

(OF THE HOLY FORTHORTHE GALACTIC EMPIRE)

HOUSE SITTING
FOR A WHILE?!



CORONA HOUSE
ROOM 106

Table of Contents

Cover

Color Illustrations

Factions Map

To Forthorthe

The Blue Knight's Return

The Cause of the Uproar

Ralgwin's Miscalculation

Technical Issues

How It's Put to Use

Afterword

Bonus Short Stories

Bonus Textless Illustrations

About J-Novel Club

Copyright

To Forthorthe

Saturday, September 24th

The galactic journey from Earth to Forthorthe took ten warps aboard the Hazy Moon. As a royal-class battleship, it could make roughly one jump per day when factoring in the time it took for pre-warp preparations and post-warp maintenance. The entire voyage thus took approximately ten days total, covering about ten million light-years.

With such vast distances, even the slightest inaccuracy in the calculations or calibrations for a single warp could result in an astronomical displacement error. Because of that, spaceships generally traveled between “stepping stone” areas of space that were large and empty enough to safely allow for such errors. That was why the trip took so many legs to complete. That said, royal-class battleships were outfitted with the finest equipment in all Forthorthe. Any normal battleship or private charter would take even longer to complete the voyage. The greatest convenience in making the long journey across the stars more comfortable was freezing time aboard the ship, which made it feel like the trip was over in the blink of an eye.

“Hmm-hmm-hmm, mm-hmm-mm!” Sanae-nee hummed.

“Warpy, warpy, warp time!” Sanae-chan sang along.

“Won’t someone get mad at us for being here?” Sanae-san fretted.

“Don’t worry. Clan-san is surprisingly nice,” Yurika assured her.

The three Sanaes and Yurika were eagerly awaiting the start of their voyage to Forthorthe. With all of their exposure to anime and manga, they had a vague idea of how warping worked. It was only natural they were excited to experience it for themselves. What wasn’t natural, however, was how they’d laid a picnic out on the bridge of the Hazy Moon, complete with a selection of snacks and drinks. Except for the worried Sanae-san, they were happily set up to enjoy their much-anticipated warp trip in style.

“Sorry to rain on your parade,” Clan called out to them, “but...”

“See? Clan-san is angry. I’m sure eating and drinking aren’t allowed on the bridge, you guys,” Sanae-san immediately began.

“I’m not angry. It’s just that we’re done already,” Clan said, indeed looking more apologetic than miffed.

At this, Sanae-chan cocked her head. “We’re done? With what?”

“The spatial distortion navigation. The warp, I mean. We just

completed the tenth jump and the flow of time has been restored... so here we are.”

It was true—the warping was already over with. Which was a huge disappointment to the Sanaes and Yurika. Even Yurika, who was ordinarily exceptionally laid-back, couldn’t help but exclaim, “Whaaaaat?! It’s over already?!”

“Why would you do the freeze right away?!” Sanae-onee demanded. “We wanted to experience the wiggleness of warping!”

“I told you to give us a warning, Glasses!” Sanae-chan added.

The Sanaes and Yurika had eagerly been anticipating the unique sensation on this trip, especially after missing out on it during their previous intergalactic journeys.

“But I *did* make an announcement,” Clan reminded them.

“We don’t understand all your Forthorthian jargon!” Sanae-chan argued.

Clan had recalled that Sanae was keen on experiencing the warp on their last journey, so she’d made an announcement beforehand per Sanae’s wishes this time. Both the Sanaes and Yurika, however, had failed to comprehend the rapidly read and technical message over the comms system. And when they’d failed to report immediately afterward, Clan had presumed she was free to begin the standard warp procedure.

“Why do you even freeze time in the first place?” Sanae-chan asked.

“Because spending days aboard the ship without even scenery to look at is boring,” Clan answered.

Freezing time during warp travel had been standard practice since Forthorthe’s space age—and for good reason. Traveling through the vastness of space with only distant stars to stare at was hard on a person. Without a proper point of reference, it was even difficult to tell whether you were moving or not. The unique wear and tear of travel under such conditions had historically led to the development of psychological disorders in passengers, so freezing time was a way to alleviate the strain on the mind. In the early years of space travel, parks and even artificial hibernation facilities for longer trips were included on ships. But with strides in technology and the development of spatial distortion came the advent of freezing time—the very same luxury that had just denied Yurika and the Sanaes the experience they’d so been looking forward to.

“Couldn’t you have frozen us after the warp?” Yurika asked.

“It’s technically safer to do it beforehand,” Clan explained.

With humans being one of the most unpredictable parameters aboard a ship, having them frozen in time made warping considerably

more reliable. For long-distance warps, the less error in measurement, the better. So Clan wanted to freeze time whenever possible.

“C’mon, Glasses! Just warp us one more time!” Sanae-chan pleaded.

“Yeah, just give us a chance to experience it!” Sanae-nee likewise begged.

“Hey, you’ve already gotten to travel between worlds. Isn’t that enough?” Sanae-san retorted.

“Apples and oranges!”

“Listen, we’ll arrive at our destination in a few hours,” Clan assured them all.

“Just one more time! Pretty please!” Sanae-chan continued to beg.

“Pretty, pretty please!” Yurika joined in. She, too, was desperate to experience the fabled warping she’d seen so much of in anime and manga.

“If it means that much to you... I guess it wouldn’t hurt,” Clan relented, ultimately caving to their petition.

“All right!” all three girls cheered, throwing their arms up in celebration.

Only Sanae-san looked displeased. “I’m sorry they’re all acting like children.”

Clan couldn’t argue that the request was childlike, but she smiled at Sanae-san nonetheless. “No need to apologize. A short-range warp is a very simple affair, much like traveling from the ship to room 106,” she said as she returned to her captain’s chair.

“The gate uses the same technology?” Sanae-san asked inquisitively.

“On a daily basis, no less. So sending a ship a short ways is really no big deal.”

Sanae-san had feared Clan would be annoyed, but in truth, Clan found it endearing. The demonstration was barely an imposition, and even if Sanae-chan, Sanae-nee, and Yurika had forgotten themselves in their childish excitement, Sanae-san still made sure to mind her manners. That was enough for Clan.

“I’m relieved, but I am sorry for the trouble,” Sanae-san apologized again.

“Heh, you’re the only serious Sanae,” Clan remarked.

“Believe me—I know.”

“Glasses, how short is ‘a short ways’?”

“We’ll have to clear our current position and then add a little more to that to be safe... so about three kilometers. And just for the record, it would be faster to walk than to set this all up.”

Preparations and follow-up for a full long-distance warp took about a day, but the process was considerably shorter for a journey of

only three kilometers. The Hazy Moon was still outside of the Forthorthe system's gravitational pull too, making it a simple procedure. The prep work would take about an hour—longer than it would take to walk an equal distance on the surface of a planet. All in all, it was a meaningless warp.

"That's fine! We just want the experience!" Sanae-chan assured her.

"Yeah! I wanna drink and think back on my homeland and family while warping like Captain Wakita!" Sanae-nee added.

"We're not old enough to drink yet," Yurika reminded her.

"And didn't Captain Wakita die immediately after that...?" Sanae-san asked hesitantly.

It seemed the gung-ho girls had no objection to the pointless warp. They just wanted to know what it felt like, so the actual distance traveled was irrelevant. In other words, this was purely for fun.

"Just be patient," Clan implored them. "We still need to take all proper precautions to comply with safety regulations."

"Okaaay!" the girls answered in chorus. This time, Sanae-san simply bowed her head apologetically.

At long last, the Sanaes and Yurika would get the full warp experience in all of its wiggly glory.

While the four girls excitedly oversaw the warp preparations with Clan, the rest of the Corona House crew was none too interested. Their minds were set on arriving in Forthorthe, such that they had little thought to spare for warping. They were all gathered in the ship's lounge, whiling away the remainder of their journey in leisure.

"Meeyow!"

"Oh? Is it dinnertime already, Snoozy?"

"Meow."

One petite passenger in particular didn't care at all about warping. He didn't even know what it was, after all. His only concerns were his dinner, his owner, and whoever might be willing to play with him. And right now he was hungry, so food was foremost on his mind.

"Here you go."

"Meow!"

As soon as Maki put down a bowl of food, Snoozy dove for it and began chowing down. Maki watched over him with a smile. She gave off a much softer impression than she once had, and Snoozy was no doubt part of the reason for that.

"Now *that's* what a magical girl looks like," Shizuka remarked as she beheld her roommate. Maki lovingly feeding Snoozy perfectly captured her mental image of a magical girl.

When he heard Shizuka's comment, Koutarou looked up from the document he was reading. "I know how you feel, but please never say that in front of Yurika, Landlord-san."

"I know, I know. I'd never say anything to upset your precious Yurika, Satomi-kun."

"She's not..."

"Not what?"

"Er..."

Koutarou had almost reflexively denied that Yurika was precious, but that wasn't how he truly felt. He couldn't put that into words, however, so he fell into a pensive silence and went back to reading his document.

"Heehee." Shizuka narrowed her eyes with a smile. She knew what Koutarou couldn't say, and she was also happy he'd left it unsaid. In truth, the other girls were too. So instead of pressing the issue, Shizuka turned back to her conversation with Kiriha. "Sorry, I got distracted."

"Heh."

"What's up?"

"Oh, I was just thinking about what a good woman you are."

"Nothing like you, Kiriha-san. Although I hope to be."

"You're more than enough. You've even devoted yourself to learning how to cook."

"That's more of a hobby than anything. It's something I picked up from my mom, but it's not like there's any deeper meaning to it."

Shizuka and Kiriha were in the middle of discussing cookery. As busy as she was, Kiriha rarely had the time to enjoy such idle chatter, but the trip to Forthorthe had given her a good excuse to indulge.

"Getting back on topic," she began, "what brand was that breeding mix that you used the other day? It was superb for a store-bought product."

"It's something the folks of the shopping district worked together to make. Rather than aiming for perfection, they set their sights a little lower to make something quick and cheap for busy mothers," Shizuka explained.

"I see. How thoughtful. That's perfect for us too."

"Right? That's why I decided to try it. And if it caught even your notice, I'd say it was a success."

Room 106 was even more packed than ever, especially with Nalfa and Kotori coming to visit. There were regularly more than ten people in the apartment nowadays, so when it came to meals, anything that was fast and easy to make was most welcome. They didn't always have the time to cook everything from scratch.

"When I go shopping next time, I'll take you to one of the stores

that sells it," Shizuka offered.

"Thank you. That said, I imagine it will be a while," Kiriha replied.

"You're right about that. We'll have to be patient."

Their gazes naturally turned to the three-dimensional display on the wall of the lounge, which depicted the Hazy Moon's location in real time. After ten warps, the ship was on the verge of entering the Forthorthian solar system. And it wouldn't be returning to Earth until the trouble with Ralgwin was resolved. In short, their shopping trip would have to wait.

Even though they'd yet to arrive in Forthorthe, Theia and Ruth were already hard at work. Because of her position, Theia would have to attend press conferences and interviews as soon as she made it home. Preparing for those ahead of time was crucial.

"This is our time to shine," said Theia.

"Let's do our best, Your Highness," Ruth replied.

"It seems being a princess isn't easy," Harumi commented.

"You should know better than most," Theia ribbed her.

"I only know what it was like two thousand years ago. I didn't experience any of the difficulties you're facing now, Theiamillis-san."

"Ha, it's true there are no records of Empress Alaia attending any press conferences or accepting any interviews."

Harumi was acting as Theia and Ruth's advisor. She was the oldest member of the Corona House crew and the most educated Earthling aboard the ship. Moreover, she possessed a portion of Alaia's memories. She thus understood the histories of both planets, making her the perfect consultant on such occasions.

"By the way, Harumi, would the citizens of Earth take offense to this?" Theia asked.

"Let me take a look... Well, it's fine overall, but there are some who won't respond well to it."

"Which part in particular?"

"This third line that says Japan is an undeveloped country. Though that may be true from Forthorthe's point of view, on Earth, it's a highly advanced nation. So even if it's true, it's a matter of pride."

"Ah, like bringing up my height," Theia remarked sagely.

"I'm envious of your height, though," Harumi replied with a smile. Being short had lots of advantages, and she'd always been jealous of that.

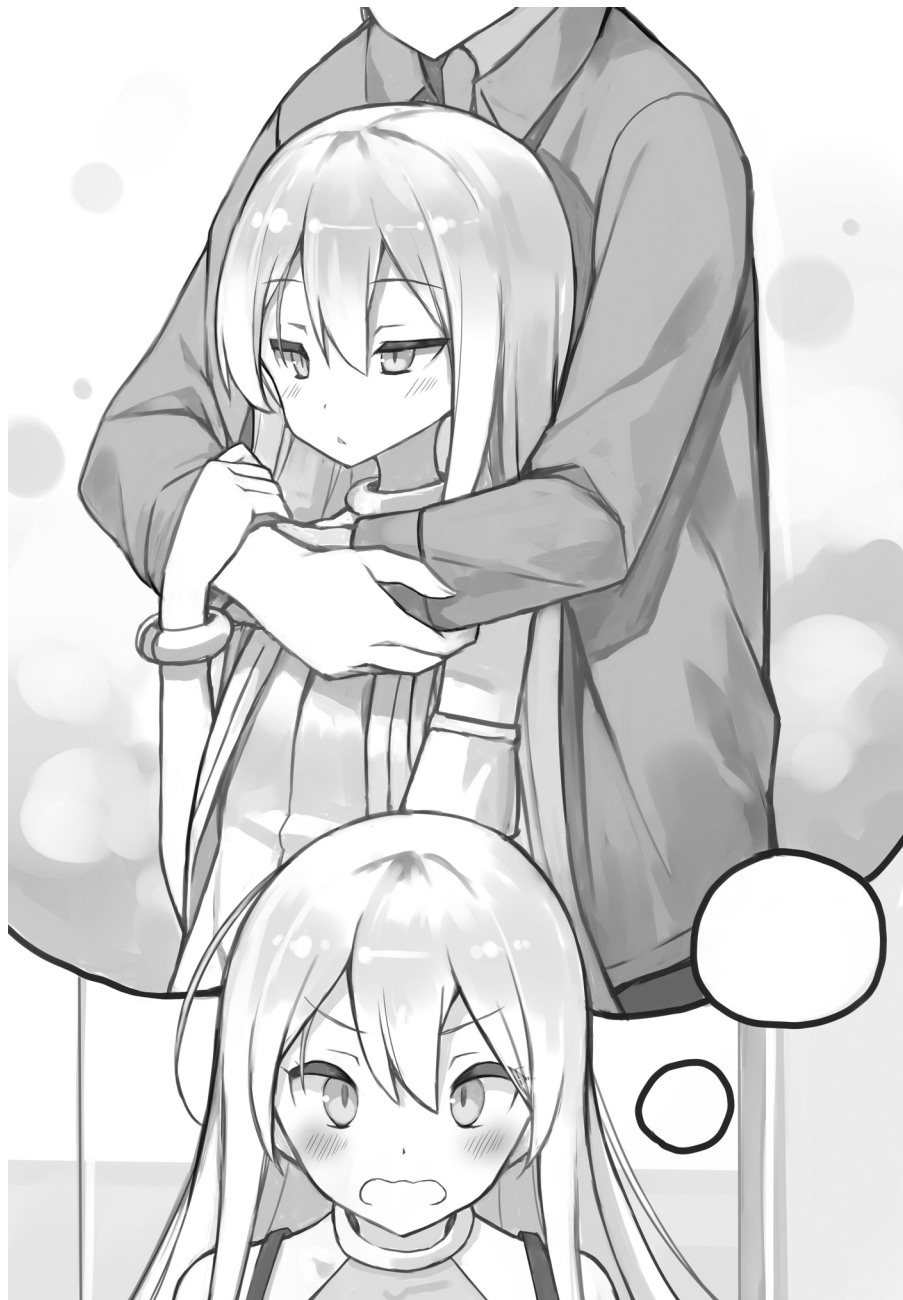
"A-Anyways, let's not conflate Japan's sensitivities with my personal hang-ups! We need to rephrase this!" Theia knew exactly what Harumi meant, and the image that flashed through her mind of

being embraced by a taller man left her blushing in embarrassment.

“Your Highness, how about we tactfully say that Earth is in the midst of its own technological development?” Ruth suggested.

“Hmm... Yes, let’s go with that.”

Theia and Ruth were drafting various speeches and the like while consulting Harumi whenever they were unsure of something. The conversation had been derailed many a time so far. The job at hand was important, of course, but they were still teenage girls.



About then, Snoozy came running over, chasing after a sponge ball. Seeing this, the girls all smiled. They loved the adorable cat and his antics.

“Meow!”

“Hello, Snoozy.”

“Meow.”

When the ball rolled up to Harumi, Snoozy prodded it a little and sat down. Upon seeing this behavior, she knew immediately what he was after.

“Do you want to play?”

“Meow!”

Hearing those words, Snoozy twitched his ears and looked up eagerly. He was ready and waiting for her to throw the ball.

“Okay, um, let’s see...” Harumi looked around the room, wondering where she should toss it. She quickly decided on a place, then wondered how hard she should throw it. *What would Theiamillis-san or Higashihongan-san do?*

Harumi pondered for a while, but just before Snoozy lost his patience, she made up her mind. “There!” Before her courage waned, she tossed the ball with all her might.

“Mrow!”

Snoozy chased after the ball with the same lithe steps he’d come bounding over with. Even as a domesticated feline, he had the agility of a wild beast. The ball gently bounced off the ground once before hitting Koutarou’s back, just as Harumi had hoped.

“What was that?” he asked absentmindedly.

“Meow!”

Koutarou turned around to find Snoozy barreling toward him. The cat had been chasing the ball at first, but after seeing Koutarou, he’d quickly changed targets.

“Mrrow!”

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?”

Snoozy pounced on Koutarou and skillfully climbed up his torso. This was a near daily exercise, and he did it with incredible speed.

“Want me to play with you?” Koutarou asked.

“Meow, meow!”

Even when Koutarou tried to catch the slippery beast, it was no use. Snoozy swiftly evaded his grasp and made it all the way up to the top of his head. Once there, the kitten ceased resisting and let Koutarou grab him.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?” Koutarou asked.

“Meow.”

“Yeah, I guess a cat doesn’t have much to do in space, huh?”

“Meow.”

Koutarou placed Snoozy on his lap. In response, Snoozy wiggled around and reached out for Koutarou with his paws. He was asking to be pet.

“Yes, yes. Right away, sir.”

Koutarou rubbed Snoozy’s belly, which the cat allowed with great pleasure. While this was going on, Koutarou thought he heard someone giggling.

“So I have you to thank for this, do I, Sakuraba-senpai?” he called out.

“Ahaha, Snoozy looked bored so I just couldn’t help myself.”

“You just couldn’t help throwing the ball at poor Koutarou, who also looked bored out of his mind?”

“You could say that.”

Koutarou, like Theia, had plenty of work to do. Currently, he was trying to memorize the document he was going over. Still, he wasn’t so busy that he couldn’t play with the cat. Harumi knew that much, and giving Koutarou a reminder of it was a special act of consideration on her part.

“Meow?!”

Upon hearing the word “ball,” Snoozy immediately jumped to his feet again. While he was fickle with his toys, the ball was his most favorite of all.

“Okay, okay.”

Koutarou picked up the toy. When he did, Snoozy sat straight up. He was prepared to charge at any time.

“Go get it!”

“Eek!”

Koutarou threw the ball at Harumi. Caught off guard, she failed to catch it and let it bounce upward. This development, however, was exactly what Snoozy had been hoping for. He used Harumi as a springboard to leap upward and swipe the ball out of the air. It was hard to imagine a kitten could be so dexterous. He then delighted in chasing it as it rolled away along the floor.

“Ah, that surprised me...”

Harumi watched Snoozy go in befuddlement, and Koutarou laughed when he saw it.

“Hahahaha, that’s a hilarious face, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“You’re such a bully, Satomi-kun!”

“Hey, you did it to me first.”

“Yes, but Snoozy wasn’t that fast when I threw the ball!”

“He and I just get each other, y’know?”

“We get along too!”

“But your motives were impure, Sakuraba-senpai.”

“You really are a bully...”

Harumi began uncharacteristically pouting like a child, although she wasn't as upset as she made it look. If anything, she was happy about being teased this way. When she first met Koutarou, he developed a habit of being overcareful with her because of her weak constitution. Over time, as they grew closer, she felt it was an impediment to their relationship. And right now, she felt like they were in the middle of breaking through that wall. She was thrilled.

“Aha, I got all that on camera!” said Kotori.

“This is great footage. I'll call this video ‘Koutarou-sama and the Kitten,’” added Nalfa.

They'd made a habit of filming the group, and they'd immediately started recording when they saw Harumi throw the ball. Thanks to that, they'd captured Koutarou's stunt with Snoozy.

“I know, Nal-chan! Why don't you throw a ball at Kou-niisan too?” Kotori suggested.

“I-I wouldn't dare!” Nalfa was shocked by Kotori's suggestion and frantically shook her head, causing her rainbow-colored hair to flutter.

“Kou-niisan won't get angry, you know?”

“I know, but no Forthorthian should ever hurl anything at Koutarou-sama. Not even a sponge ball.”

“But you know you're gonna have to work up the guts to push yourself, right?”

“Ugh, I don't have any confidence... but I will do my best...”

Nalfa was up against a challenge similar to what Harumi had faced, but in her case, the obstacle was her own heart. If she couldn't get over it, she'd forever be resigned to watching from the sidelines—and that wasn't what she wanted.

“Speaking of having no confidence...” began Kotori, bringing her hands together in a pleading gesture. “Do I really have to go through with *you-know-what*?”

“You do. You didn't help me when I was struggling with my speech, so I'm going to insist even if you don't want to do it.”

“Oh noooooo.”

Nalfa had a new idea for a video series entitled “Matsudaira Kotori's Forthorthe Diary.” It would be the inverse of Nalfa's recordings in Japan—in other words, Kotori's video diary of life in Forthorthe.

“Why don't we just scrap that? Nobody would care about my take on anything...” Kotori whined.

“That's what I thought about my videos at first too, so don't you worry!” Nalfa assured her.

Kotori was nervous about the project. Like with Nalfa's videos, their plan was to upload Matsudaira Kotori's Forthorthe Diary in both

Japan and Forthorthe—although there would be a slight delay for the Earth version. They would need to scrutinize the footage to make sure it didn't contain anything sensitive. But Kotori didn't think there was any demand for a video series about a normal girl like her—either on Earth or Forthorthe.

“Just be yourself, Kotori. That's what Nalfa-san wants to film,” Kenji said with a smile. He was assembling something small made of plastic, but he paused his work when he caught wind of his sister's nerves.

“Nii-san...”

“She thinks the people of Forthorthe would be interested in seeing how a regular Earthling reacts to Forthorthian society and culture. Right, Nalfa-san?”

“Yes, and I'm sure they'd love to know more about Koutarou-sama's childhood friend, so they'll be interested in you too, Kotori.”

“So, like I said, just be yourself,” Kenji reiterated. “Trying to be anything else would defeat the point.”

“Nii-san, you're surprisingly insightful at times like this...”

“What's there to be surprised about? I'm in the drama club, remember?”

“Oh, right. I guess you *would* know about this kind of stuff. Haha.”

Thanks to Kenji, Kotori had a smile on her face again—and it wasn't the first time this had happened. The new video project on the horizon was already bringing them closer together. At this rate, Kenji was slowly but surely redeeming himself in his sister's eyes.

“You'll also need to be yourself, Mackenzie-sama,” Nalfa reminded Kenji.

“What?!” he yelped.

“You're Koutarou-sama's childhood friend too, after all. The people of Forthorthe would love to know more about you as well!”

“Who would give a crap about me?!”

“Hahaha, let's do our best together, Nii-san... Wait, we're supposed to act natural.”

Kotori and Kenji's relationship was improving in part because they'd left their normal lives behind—including Kenji's love life, the source of the conflict between them. But that was just one reason. More than anything, the siblings had been growing closer purely because they'd had more chances to talk to one another recently.

Thank you, Nalfa-san. Really...

And for that, Kenji was deeply grateful to Nalfa. Without her and her idea for the new video series, he and his little sister wouldn't have had the occasion. It had basically given them a chance to make up, so he was ready and willing to do anything he could to help out with it.

“Brother Mackenzie! Help, ho!”

“What’s up?”

“We can’t get the paint to mix right, ho! We need your wisdom and guidance, ho!”

“Okay, hang on a minute.”

Kenji was currently helping the haniwas and Alunaya make RC cars. The small plastic bit in his hand was actually a gearbox. Though Kenji had gotten into acting in high school, he’d shared most of Koutarou’s hobbies in his younger years, so he knew just as much about RC cars. He wasn’t as skilled a racer as Koutarou because of his less daring personality, but he was better at putting the models together. The haniwas were more than happy to rely on his expertise while Koutarou and Clan were busy. But rather than for themselves, they were currently beseeching him on Alunaya’s behalf.

“I am sorry to trouble you, Mackenzie. I want to paint the body in the same color as my scales, but the mixing isn’t going as expected.”

“Ah, I got you. The paint tends to dry a little darker than it looks. Let me see what I can do.”

Mixing paint was a tricky art to begin with, but the final color also varied based on the amount of paint thinner and primer used. Alunaya wanted the body of his RC car to match his scales, and replicating the color exactly had proved more difficult than he could handle on his own.

“You’re my only hope, Mackenzie.”

This kind of work that required experience and intuition was Kenji’s forte. After glancing at Alunaya’s body, he began whipping something up. He used a dropper to collect small samples of different paints into a metal dish and swirl them together. He then repeated this process several times, making sure to record the proportions of the paint he used with each variation. It took five tries all told, but he worked quickly and without hesitation. Alunaya observed this all with relief and satisfaction.

“After this, you should help us too, ho!”

“We can’t put the decals on right, ho!”

“Yeah, that part can be tricky. I’ll be with you as soon as I’m done with this.”

“Hooray, ho!”

“You’re our hero, ho!”

Kenji had grown popular with the haniwas and Alunaya. While he wasn’t as technically proficient as Clan, he had the dexterity to make up for it. And right now, what the RC newbies needed wasn’t specialized instruction; it was simply advice they could understand. In that sense, Kenji made the perfect coach for them.

Two pairs of eyes were watching Kenji. One belonged to Nalfa.

“Kotori, Mackenzie-sama is oddly nurturing, isn’t he?”

“Oddly? No, this is who he really is... Or who he *was* until high school.”

The other pair belonged to Kotori. The two girls Kenji had just been talking to observed him as he helped Alunaya and the haniwas.

“Ahahaha, then I think I can understand why you’ve been so angry at him.”

“Heh. I wish he was always like this.”

Right now, Kenji was behaving just like the kind older brother that Kotori so proudly remembered. She’d always chased after him as a child, and she felt both happy and nostalgic to see this side of him once more. That was yet another reason the siblings had begun to make up.

“Everyone, at the request of the Sanaes, we will be making a very short warp. For your safety, please stay still for a moment,” Clan announced over the comms system.

Preparations for the final warp were finally complete. After that, only a few short hours would separate the crew from Forthorthe, and they each intended to spend that time as leisurely as they possibly could. After the Hazy Moon landed, there was no telling how arduous the trial ahead of them would be—or how long it would be before they could relax again.

The Blue Knight's Return

Saturday, September 24th

Forthorthe was the third of eight planets in the Forthorthian system, so sailing for the final few hours of the voyage instead of warping was primarily for safety. It was over four billion kilometers from the outer edge of the system—from the proximity of the eighth planet to the third—and long-distance warps near densely populated areas were strictly forbidden by law, as any error could have disastrous consequences. Only short-range warps, like the kind the Corona House crew used on a daily basis via the gate aboard Blue Knight, were permitted in the vicinity of population centers. Such trips had a much smaller margin of error (and were therefore much safer) than warps across the astronomical distances covered during longer jumps.

That said, since preparations for longer jumps took the better part of a day, there was also a very practical reason for simply sailing while within the solar system—it was faster. Thus Koutarou and the girls were currently cruising toward Forthorthe by the power of regular rockets. As they closed in, the image of the planet grew larger on the monitor on the bridge. Koutarou stood staring at it.

“We’re finally here...” he muttered. The galactic journey had seemed like nothing more than a long day aboard the Hazy Moon thanks to the ship’s ability to freeze time, but to an active boy like Koutarou, spending a whole day reading in the lounge was exhausting.

Clan, who was seated in her captain’s chair, overheard him and smiled. “We actually made it here in shockingly little time, you know?”

“Space is just too big for me,” he replied with a laugh and a shrug.

Like Clan said, a journey across the universe in a single day (or ten, strictly speaking) was unbelievably fast. Koutarou knew that, but he still had trouble grasping the sheer vastness of space. He couldn’t get his head around traveling to a different galaxy in the time it took to travel to a different country.

“That’s awfully small-minded for a man who could own half this galaxy,” Clan ribbed him.

“It’s just too big if you ask me. Room 106 is much more my size,” Koutarou said in return.

Indeed, the entirety of Forthorthe was simply too large for his liking. He had no desire for all that. He wanted something more his style—something cozier.

“If there’s a place for me there, I don’t mind how small it is,” Clan replied.

“That’s awfully small-minded for a woman who could own half this galaxy,” Koutarou ribbed her now.

“Veltlion, you should be honored I’d say that,” she said, narrowing her eyes. In truth, she felt the same way he did. She wanted something cozy, and she happily would have traded her share of the galaxy for it.

“I *am* flattered you staked your life on someone like me,” Koutarou said with a small smile. He could no longer deny what Clan and the other girls had risked for his sake.

“Oh, so you acknowledge it now,” she replied with an even brighter smile. She placed a hand against her chest and felt something warm blooming within her.

“Yeah, that’s the problem,” Koutarou said plainly.

It was because Koutarou now acknowledged the girls that he couldn’t choose between them. Before he’d realized it, all nine of them had taken a place in his heart. They’d all put their lives on the line for him in the past year too. He had every reason to accept each of them and nary a reason to turn any of them away, making it infinitely impossible to choose between them.

“Heh, cornering you wouldn’t be a good idea, so I’ll leave it at that for the time being,” Clan relented. The warm feeling in her chest was enough for her, and she knew that she might lose it if she pushed too far.

“Thanks... So, where are we headed now?” Koutarou asked, changing the subject with a forced smile. He really was up against an impossible dilemma and talking about it was hard, so he appreciated Clan’s consideration.

“Why, we’ll be landing on Forthorthe, of course,” Clan answered him with a chuckle.

“That’s not what I meant. Are we going to an orbital spaceport, or are we landing directly on the surface?”

“Ah. We’ll be touching down in Fornorn.”

Fornorn was the Forthorthian capital—and the Hazy Moon’s current destination. There were primarily two ways of getting from a spaceship to the planet’s surface. The first was docking at a space station and using a transfer gate to warp there. The second was to land directly on the surface of the planet. Clan had the ship on a course for the latter.

“Elfaria-san said that it wouldn’t feel right for a hero to make his

grand homecoming via warp gate,” Clan explained.

“What is she up to this time?” Koutarou grumbled. He wouldn’t have thought much about landing in Fornorn if Elfaria’s name hadn’t come up.

“Heh, don’t worry,” Clan assured him. “I believe she simply planned it this way because we need a large hotel.”

“A large hotel? For what?” Koutarou asked.

“You know we’ll be having a press conference upon our return, don’t you?” she asked in turn.

“Yeah. That’s what I’ve been getting ready for this whole trip.”

“There weren’t any venues large enough in space, so we’ll be proceeding to the largest event space at a bayside hotel once we land.”

“We don’t need anything *that* big,” Koutarou objected.

“Of course we do,” Clan insisted. “There will be over ten thousand reporters.”

“Th-There will?!”

Indeed, over ten thousand members of the press would be present for the press conference. The number staggered Koutarou. He’d expected a few dozen or so reporters like any press conference, so a five-figure attendance blew his mind.

“And that’s after cutting back for safety reasons,” Clan informed him.

“That Elle... She’s trying to turn this into a huge event, isn’t she?”

“I don’t believe Elfaria-san had to do anything in particular under the circumstances,” Clan muttered, suddenly evasive and red in the face.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Koutarou asked.

“W-Well, um... Theiamillis-san and I left for Earth in order to bring you back to Forthorthe... so the citizens will naturally assume, erm, you know...” Clan looked away, fiddling with her hair.

Seeing this, Koutarou grew uneasy. “No, I don’t know. What’s going on?”

“Well... Take a look at this.”

Clan used her computer to bring up a news feed from Forthorthe. They were close enough to the planet now that they could pick up live broadcasts. On screen was a massive crowd packed around the spaceport. There were tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of people, all excitedly awaiting the return of the princesses and the Blue Knight.

“The citizens of Forthorthe... Wait, what’s this?!” Koutarou gasped when he noticed something peculiar.

Many members of the crowd were holding up three-dimensional banners and placards inscribed in Common Forthorthian with messages like “Congratulations on your engagement, Your Excellency and Your Highness.”

Indeed, the people of Forthorthe believed Koutarou was getting married.

Theia and Clan had both spoken of marriage before embarking for Earth, so naturally, Forthorthe presumed they'd returned victorious in their conquest. People were speculating about whether Koutarou would be taking Theia's, Clan's, or even Nefilforan's hand. And since it was the chief question on everyone's mind, the reporters at the press conference naturally got straight down to business.

"As I'm sure we're all dying to know, has the Blue Knight returned to Forthorthe to wed one of the princesses?" Danesford Laren from *Economics Mastir* asked. Despite his young age, he was highly regarded for his sharp analyses and smart writing style. After producing numerous high-quality articles during the civil war, he'd been awarded Journalist of the Year—which included the honor of asking the first question at this prestigious event.

"Unfortunately, that isn't the case," Theia answered nervously. She was no stranger to press conferences and would have been as cool as a cucumber under any other circumstance, but Danesford—the reporter she hated most—put her on edge. "But we have indeed returned with the Blue Knight for other reasons."

"Your Excellency, is marriage truly not among those reasons?" Danesford pressed.

"That's correct," Koutarou answered. Unlike Theia, he was perfectly calm. He'd prepared himself for the question after hearing what all the uproar was about. "It's still too early for that. I'm too young to get married."

"I don't know about that, Your Excellency. You're the leader of a band of knights," Danesford continued.

In Forthorthe, knighthood was a familial honor passed down through the generations. When knights were the vanguards of the army, Forthorthe had held that the sooner they got married, the better. Though the nation and its traditions had modernized over the years, it was still a celebrated occasion when the heirs to long-respected lineages like the Pardomshihans got married. And that joy would only be amplified if it were to the Blue Knight.

"Then let me add that it's not a decision to be made lightly," Koutarou replied.

That said, if Koutarou wanted to marry, he would face two tremendous obstacles. The first was a legal hurdle. According to Forthorthian law, royals were only allowed to wed other Forthorthians. This was a technicality to prevent the royal families from being taken over. Anyone who wed into royalty would have to become a Forthorthian citizen. Of course, a special exception could be

made for the Blue Knight—but that would fly in the face of tradition, which the Blue Knight himself sought to honor. The easiest solution would therefore be to have Koutarou become a Forthorthian, but since neither Japan nor Forthorthe recognized dual citizenships, that would mean having to renounce his homeland. As he'd said, it was not a decision to be made lightly.

The second obstacle was purely a question of who, exactly, he would marry. And while that appeared to be a simple matter of choice on the surface, it was just as nuanced and complex of an issue in Koutarou's heart. Choosing between the girls would be the hardest decision of his life.

"I think I speak for all of Forthorthe when I said that we're eagerly awaiting news of your marriage, Your Excellency," Danesford said solemnly.

The situation was equally frustrating for the people of Forthorthe. The Blue Knight was effectively guaranteed a position as an honorary member of the royal families due to Alaia's decree, but they longed to call him one of their own, and the easiest way for him to join Forthorthian society was to marry into it. Danesford had specifically asked about the princesses, but in truth, Koutarou could marry any Forthorthian—including Ruth, Elfaria, or a girl he met on the street. That said, because of Koutarou's special legal status in Forthorthe (which was only vaguely defined in several respects), there would inevitably be bureaucratic headaches if tried to marry without obtaining citizenship first. People thus assumed that would be the natural order of things...

Yet the Blue Knight himself had just announced that he'd returned to Forthorthe with no intention of getting married. Hearing this, some reporters dashed out of the conference in order to be the first to deliver the news. The event was so high profile that many news organizations had sent multiple representatives. Most of the reporters who ran out of the building still had colleagues in attendance. Once they heard the next bit of breaking news, they too would make a swift exit. With this method, they could continually report the latest as it was announced. It was an old-school tactic they had to rely on when restrictions were imposed on communication devices at the event.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," Koutarou apologized.

"If marriage truly isn't the reason you've returned... then what is?" Danesford inquired. It was a natural question. Earth was ten million light years away, so there had to be a reason the Blue Knight had chosen to come back.

"I primarily have two reasons," Koutarou answered with faltering. He'd expected this as well. "The first is to inspect the construction of the new Blue Knight. The details were conveyed to me on Earth, but I

felt the need to see it for myself.”

During the civil war triggered by Vandarion’s coup, Theia’s flagship, Blue Knight, was virtually totaled. It could still fly, but it was in such sorry shape that scrapping it was cheaper than repairing it. Therefore a plan had been proposed to construct an entirely new ship for her as well as a new Blue Knight, which would be the Blue Knight’s own personal battleship. Theia had already shared the details with Koutarou, but he still wanted to see it with his own two eyes.

“Understandable, certainly,” Danesford replied, nodding as several reporters ran out. It only seemed reasonable that the Blue Knight wanted to oversee the construction of his own personal ship, after all. Perhaps it wasn’t a compelling enough reason to cross the universe—but Koutarou had said that he had two reasons for coming. “And what might the second be?”

“The second is to take responsibility.”

“Responsibility?” Danesford cocked his head, unsatisfied. Koutarou’s answer was too vague to comprehend.

“That’s right. While we were thankfully able to put a stop to the coup last year, too many people were still hurt in the process. And while Vandarion and his men were to blame for that harm, I still bear responsibility for the soldiers who followed me and any citizens caught in the crossfire. In an attempt to make things right, I asked Princess Clariosa to design and invent something special.”

An image popped up on the three-dimensional monitor behind Koutarou. It was a small metal and plastic box attached to a woman’s waist. Anyone with military experience would have recognized it immediately as standard issue in the Forthorthian army.

“A spatial distortion field generator?” Danesford muttered. He wasn’t a soldier, but he’d done plenty of military reporting. He immediately knew what the device was, although he couldn’t connect it to what Koutarou said about taking responsibility.

“It is indeed a barrier generator, but it’s a special one,” Koutarou explained. He then whispered into his bracelet, “Take it away, Nana-san.”

“Yes, my lord!” Nana answered in a playful tone, knowing that only Koutarou could hear her. The next moment, she appeared on the far right side of the platform where Koutarou was answering questions. “How about this?!”

When Nana hit the stage, she started running. A few meters before reaching Koutarou, she threw herself forward and pushed off the ground with her hands, lifting her entire body up into the air. She did several flips before silently landing right next to Koutarou. Her entire performance was displayed on the large monitor behind him for all the crowd to witness.



“Nice work,” Koutarou offered.

“You honor me, Your Excellency,” Nana replied.

The audience erupted into a unified cheer when she smiled at him. After Nana had come to a stop, they realized why such a petite girl was showing off such flashy acrobatics.

“As you just witnessed, this isn’t a defensive barrier generator,” Koutarou explained. “It’s a new medical device we’re calling a power assistance field, or PAF, that uses selective distortion fields in place of traditional prosthetics.”

Nana currently wasn’t wearing her artificial arm or leg. A distortion field, slightly colored for visual effect, was deployed in their place. This was how she’d performed her gymnastic feat, and thanks to that, everyone instantly understood the purpose and power of the PAF.

“I guess no one’s listening, huh?” Koutarou remarked under his breath.

“Isn’t it great? That makes this a smashing success,” Nana replied with a giggle.

At this point, the reporters felt they knew why the Blue Knight had come back to Forthorthe. They began rushing toward the exit in droves. He may not have been getting married, but the reason for his return was nevertheless big news—and everyone was anxious to be the first to report on it.

In the blink of an eye, headlines about the Blue Knight entering the medical equipment market spread throughout Forthorthe and all across the galaxy—meaning word reached even *them*.

“Here I was, thinking he’d finally come chasing after us. But he’s here to peddle medical equipment,” Ralgwin grumbled.

“Medical equipment...? But Ralgwin-dono, this appears to be a variation of the energy field that you are using for defense,” observed Grevanas.

“That’s right. To make this easier for you to understand... the invention is like the Blue Knight’s armor but made purely from mana so that it can be turned on and off in an instant. Granted, its performance is worse in exchange.”

“In other words, it prizes practicality... Interesting.”

Ralgwin and Grevanas were watching the three-dimensional monitor in their command room. Displayed was a reporter excitedly talking about the Blue Knight’s return. Ralgwin and Grevanas had anticipated he’d arrive in Forthorthe eventually—but they’d never imagined it would be because of medical equipment.

As Ralgwin sat there bemused, a voice called out to him.

“Ralgwin.”

Ralgwin knew the voice and replied without the slightest hint of surprise, “You’re back again, Gray Knight.”

“Only just,” the new arrival replied.

It was indeed the Gray Knight. He’d departed for Forthorthe ahead of the Corona House crew, but both parties had arrived at about the same time. Koutarou and the others were able to take the shortest possible route, while the Gray Knight had been forced to take a detour out of caution.

“So, were you able to confirm what you wanted?” Ralgwin asked.

As things stood, Signaltin shone with all the colors of the rainbow—but its light was weak. And the Gray Knight had stayed behind on Earth to figure out why. He’d only followed Ralgwin and Grevanas to Forthorthe after investigating the matter to his satisfaction.

“I have a better grasp of the situation now. And I know what I need to do next,” he explained.

“And what’s that?” Grevanas asked with a gleam in his sunken eyes. He, too, was interested in Signaltin and its many colors. He knew firsthand just how dangerous the sword was, and he knew it stood to cut short his plans for the future. His cagey mind wanted to learn everything about it. “Dealing with Signaltin’s true power is no mean feat.”

“That’s right. I’ll need to prepare—and I’ll do so while helping you,” the Gray Knight replied.

While the Gray Knight had uncovered the reason for Signaltin’s weakened glow, he’d yet to accomplish his true goal. Nevertheless, he now saw a path to doing so. He simply needed the time—and quite a bit of it—to get ready. Meanwhile, he saw no harm in continuing to assist Ralgwin.

“It sounds like you have quite a plan in mind,” Grevanas remarked.

“That’s good news for us. But are you sure?” Ralgwin asked. “About helping us, I mean.”

“It wouldn’t be fair to offer nothing in return,” the Gray Knight replied.

Ralgwin would assist the Gray Knight with his preparations, and in exchange, the Gray Knight would help Ralgwin achieve his goals. Those were the terms the Gray Knight offered to Ralgwin. It was a good—even necessary—deal in Ralgwin’s eyes. For better or worse, he had no reason to refuse.

“I shall gladly accept your aid,” said Grevanas, equally accepting of the deal.

“Even if you’ve changed your stance, you’re still chivalrous in your own way,” added Ralgwin with an approving nod before turning his attention back to the monitor.

The footage had switched to Princess Clariossa, who was giving a technical explanation of the PAF.

“Distortion field generators monitor the user and their surrounding environment to deploy the field as well as adjust its strength and range. With this model, we’ve improved function so that the distortion field transforms in real time with the user. It doesn’t use any new technology, and as a piece of medical equipment, our goal was to make it as reliable as possible.”

Ralgwin listened to the princess and stared at the man standing behind her—the Blue Knight. His mortal enemy. The biggest obstacle between him and taking over Forthorthe. And the person he’d sworn revenge on for the death of his uncle.

“What do you make of this, Gray Knight?” Ralgwin asked, both out of curiosity and in hopes the Gray Knight would be able to see through Koutarou.

“It’s a diversion for the public. Unveiling it wasn’t his real goal in coming here, and it poses no threat to us,” the Gray Knight answered simply. The device was worthless in his eyes.

“Really? It looks quite effective to me,” argued Ralgwin, who saw things differently. The PAF functioned like a power-assisted suit that allowed free movement. It only used energy when force was input, so it lasted a long time too. On the battlefield where anything could happen, it could prove useful in all kinds of ways.

“Maybe for a normal army, but not for us,” said the Gray Knight.

“You mean magic or spiritual energy technology would be more effective,” Ralgwin mused.

“Hahaha, shall I make us something similar with magic?” Grevanas offered.

Ralgwin and the Gray Knight now had both magic and spiritual energy technology at their disposal. Between the two, they could easily create something better than the PAF. So regardless of its practicality as a tool, they did not perceive it as a threat. It would make no difference in their fight with the Blue Knight. The Gray Knight had a much more logistical concern.

“The truly disconcerting part is that they could deploy the military under the guise of moving the product given the massive demand this will create,” he explained.

Both the reconstruction of the Blue Knight and the introduction of the PAF would have supplies and manpower traveling across the solar system. Koutarou clearly intended to galvanize the economy after the disruptions caused by the civil war, and Forthorthe’s military could stealthily be mobilized in the background. Ralgwin, who was still in hiding, kept a vigilant eye on the Imperial Army’s movements. If the army was about to start moving in secret, that posed a danger far

greater than the PAF itself.

"The Blue Knight owns DKI, which would make the perfect front for the army," Grevanas added, agreeing with the Gray Knight's assessment of the true danger.

"What a thorn in my side," Ralgwin grumbled, likewise agreeing.

"The Blue Knight is one thing, but Elfaria will undoubtedly make a move. She's exceedingly shrewd. With so many cards in her hands, it would be stupid *not* to play," said the Gray Knight. He understood that the empress was the biggest threat of all. He knew she might use the deployment of the PAF as more than just cover for something.

"I see you're familiar with that vixen," Ralgwin remarked.

"It's an old story," the Gray Knight replied after a pause.

"Well then, we'll need to develop some kind of countermeasure," said Ralgwin.

"Hmm," Grevanas hummed pensively. "For starters, we should increase surveillance around the port. It's an old-fashioned tactic, but we won't be able to catch the royal families just by monitoring paperwork."

It was easy enough to disguise a paper trail—but not the actual transport itself. There was an obvious difference between spacecrafts meant for transporting cargo and passengers, so simply keeping tabs on the port was a surefire way to gather information about their movement. That much hadn't changed from two thousand years ago.

"They're calling the shots here, so all we can do is play along... but so be it," Ralgwin acquiesced. He immediately called up his chief of intelligence and instructed them to monitor all nearby ports and warp gates.

As Grevanas observed this, he realized something was unusual.

"By the way, Ralgwin-dono, where is that aide of yours?"

He'd noticed the absence of Fasta, who typically passed on the details of Ralgwin's orders and plans. It was unusual for the commander to do so himself.

"She's on a mission in a remote location. It's not her specialty, but we're short on pawns and she's the only one I could entrust the job to," Ralgwin answered matter-of-factly, briefly looking up from his work.

"I see... So it's something you couldn't trust us with."

"Take it that way if you like."

"Ohoho, how terrifying."

Grevanas had taken Ralgwin's words at face value, but the Gray Knight sensed more to them. He watched Ralgwin working away at his computer... but said nothing. He simply stared for a few moments, then turned and left the command room. He had plenty of work to do himself.

Danesford Laren was Nalfa Laren's older brother. He'd come to the Blue Knight's press conference for work, but he saw no reason not to say hi to his sister while he was there. Once he'd wrapped up his business, he went to see her for the first time in months.

"Brother!"

"Nalfa?! Stop, don't run!"

The moment Nalfa laid eyes on him, she began dashing toward him—and Danesford immediately foresaw the consequences. He ran forward to meet her before she could fall. And sure enough, she tripped over a slight bump in the floor.

"Eee—"

"What did I tell you, Nalfa?!"

"—eek! I'm fine!"

Danesford, his arms outstretched, rushed to catch his tumbling sister, but something strange happened. Even though she yelped in a panic, she managed to catch and right herself all on her own. She held her arms out like a ski jumper who'd just stuck a landing.



"It's been too long, brother," she called in greeting.

"And you've certainly grown in that time," Danesford replied.

He gave her high marks for not falling. In the past, she would have ended up flat on her face. Nevertheless, she proceeded to leap up into Danesford's arms. After not seeing him for so long, she didn't see the harm in having him dote on her a little bit.

"Hup!"

"...I take it all back. It seems you're still just a child."

Danesford didn't mind his sister hugging him, but there was quite a crowd around them. His colleagues were nearby, and so were her friends. He was keenly aware of all the eyes on them. One such observer—a young girl—approached.

"Ahaha, Nal-chan, I see you turn into a baby around your brother."

"Oh, you're..." Danesford recognized the girl. She'd appeared in some of Nalfa's videos. He couldn't remember her unusual name, however. Before it could come to him...

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Matsudaira Kotori, Nal-chan's friend," she said, politely introducing herself with a deep bow.

Danesford hurriedly set Nalfa down to return Kotori's greeting. "I'm Danesford Laren. Thank you for looking after my little sister."

His manners made a favorable impression on Kotori. Since he seemed to get along with his sister, she imagined that he was a good brother.

"Oh, I hardly have to look after her," Kotori replied. "We're always having fun together."

"But haven't you been in danger...?"

"We have not!" Nalfa insisted.

"Ahaha, Kou-niisan is in charge of Nal-chan when things like that happen."

"Kou-niisan"? Ah, if I recall correctly, you have a brother as well, don't you?" Danesford remembered as much from Nalfa's messages, so he naturally assumed that's who Kotori meant.

"I do, but that's not... Kou-niisan, can you come here for a moment?" Kotori called.

"Hmm? What's up?" Koutarou replied.

"Kou-niisan is my childhood friend and—" Kotori tried to explain, but...

"Y-Y-Your Excellency?!" Danesford sputtered when he saw who was approaching.

So the "Kou" in "Kou-niisan" comes from His Excellency's real name! Wh-Who'd have thought?!

Danesford's face went pale. He was an excellent reporter with a

good intuition, so he immediately put two and two together. The Blue Knight himself had been watching over his little sister.

“Oh, aren’t you...” Koutarou began.

“Your Excellency, thank you most graciously for looking after my sister!” Danesford had been so bold during the press conference, but now he was acting like a child who’d been caught by his parents in the middle of some mischief. Knowing a legendary hero had been taking care of his sister humbled him that much.

“Your sister? I don’t quite follow...” Koutarou confessed.

“Koutarou, that is Danesford Laren, Nalfa’s older brother,” Theia explained.

She’d grasped the situation right away. Danesford was a capable reporter who’d given her no end of trouble during the civil war. She loathed him enough that she distinctly remembered his face. She was also aware that he was Nalfa’s brother, as his good reputation had played a small part in Nalfa being chosen as one of the first transfer students to Earth.

“You’re... Nalfa-san’s brother?” Koutarou repeated.

“He is! He’s so brilliant, it’s hard to imagine we’re related!” Nalfa jumped in, apparently quite proud of Danesford. She’d been thrilled for him when he was recognized as a journalist, and she was equally thrilled now to be able to introduce him to her new friends.

“And he’s mortified after learning you’ve personally been protecting his sister,” Theia continued to explain.

“I’m not doing anything special, Danesford-san,” Koutarou reassured him with a smile.

With the conclusion of the press conference, Koutarou had changed from his knight uniform into plain clothes. He was also speaking freely and casually as he did in his daily life. Right now, he wasn’t the Blue Knight—he was just an average high schooler. Not that Danesford was in any state to appreciate that.

“Still, Your Excellency, I’d never dream of asking you to—”

“I know lots of unreliable girls, so what’s one more?” Koutarou countered with a smile, glancing over his shoulder at some of said girls.

“I’m not unreliable!” Sanae-chan insisted.

“That’s right! We Sanaes won’t stand for this slander!” Sanae-nee agreed. They both proudly thought of themselves as Koutarou’s guardian angel.

“I don’t know... I think he has a point,” Sanae-san argued. The other Sanaes ignored her.

“Who else did you mean besides me?” Yurika asked. She knew good and well that she was counted among the unreliable girls, but if the Sanaes weren’t on the list—as they insisted—then she wanted to

know who was.

"I think he meant me," Maki said with a smile. She saw herself as unreliable.

However, Yurika shook her head. "No way, Maki-chan. You're so dependable."

"I think my problem is my unstable mentality. I too easily fall into a negative spiral."

Yurika thought of Maki as a role model, both as a student and a magical girl. But Maki was talking about something much deeper than that. Something within her. A dark side that she was all too familiar with.

"Not lately," Yurika argued. "Especially since you got Snoozy."

"Really...? I'm glad..."

Maki smiled again. She hadn't seen it for herself until Yurika pointed it out, but she *had* been a lot more positive with Snoozy in her life. She'd probably just been too busy taking care of the cat to be negative, but it was still a good thing. Her smile was accordingly a bright one.

Meanwhile, Danesford remained unconvinced by Koutarou's polite reassurances. He was too shaken by the development, and he was taking it out on Nalfa.

"That's why I said it was too early for you to study abroad!" he fussed.

"Hngh, you were right... I'm sorry," Nalfa apologized, shrinking back. She'd felt her brother was a worrywart before she left Forthorthe, but after all the mishaps in Japan, she had to admit there was merit to his worries.

"Really, just being Kin-chan's friend is more than reason enough for me to protect Nalfa-san. And now that she's my friend too, I don't even need a reason," Koutarou continued to try to talk Danesford down.

"That's right, Nal-chan! If you'd never come to Earth, I would have had one less friend! And I've never once thought you were a burden."

Nalfa had first been introduced to the Corona House crew as Kotori's friend, but she'd long since befriended Koutarou and the other girls personally. He saw that as a good reason to take care of her—not as an inconvenience. Kotori felt the same way, and her willingness to express it was a positive effect of her friendship with Nalfa, who'd helped draw her out of her shell.

"Danesford, I'm sure that Nalfa's other friends on Earth feel the same way. Of all the transfer students, she's doing the best in spite of her flaws. She is without a doubt spearheading good relations between Forthorthe and Earth. You should be proud of your sister," Theia

interjected.

“Your Highness... What an honor,” Danesford replied, finally calming down.

Nalfa had made all kinds of friends on Earth, and each bond she fostered helped forge a connection between all Earthlings and Forthorthians. In that sense, she really was the superstar of the transfer students—and that would have been true even without her video work.

“I’m glad to hear you’re doing well on Earth, Nalfa,” said Danesford.

“I had no idea what I was doing when I first got there... Heehee.” Nalfa giggled giddily upon being praised by her big brother. It tickled her.

Good for you, Nal-chan... Kotori understood how she felt, so she smiled as she quietly watched over the siblings.

“I forgot to say it earlier, Nalfa, but welcome back,” Danesford finally told his sister.

“It’s good to be home!”

The small family reunion turned out to be a warm one indeed, but it was short and sweet. Danesford still had work to do, so he departed shortly afterward. He’d have plenty of time to catch up with Nalfa at home once things settled down, after all.

Koutarou and the girls had plenty to do as well, so they quickly set out for their next destination.

“Danesford-san is a nice guy,” Koutarou mumbled, staring out the window of a vehicle somewhere between a helicopter and a luxury car. It used spatial distortion technology to fly, so the scenery was zipping by outside.

“He’s terrible! I despise him!” Theia shouted, emphatic about her grudge against the reporter for giving her such a hard time at a critical press conference during the war.

“He was just doing his job,” Koutarou reminded her. “Wouldn’t it be a bigger problem if he were friendly at times like that?”

“I don’t care!”

“Well, I like him.”

“You would,” Kenji cut in. “He’s just like you—a real worrier.”

Like Koutarou, Kenji had walked away from their encounter with a positive opinion of Danesford. As a fellow older brother, he deeply sympathized with the man. He could still recall being worried out of his mind when Kotori started high school. Danesford also reminded him a bit of Koutarou, which was a huge plus in Kenji’s book.

“I think we’d get along,” said Koutarou. “Not that he has the time to hang out or anything, I’m sure.”

“I mean, you *did* just create a ton of work for him by coming back here,” Kenji ribbed him.

Koutarou was plenty busy in Forthorthe—meaning Danesford and the rest of the Forthorthian press would inevitably be busy too. They’d scarcely have any time to socialize. Koutarou thought it was a shame.

“Speaking of work, Satomi-san...” Nana called out to him. She was riding along in the vehicle with the group, en route to her next job now that her role during the press conference was over. She flashed the green light on her bracelet, which indicated incoming mail. “We’ve already got an order from our side.”

“You mean from Nefilforan’s squad?” Koutarou asked. Nana was still serving as Nefilforan’s adjutant, so he knew she hadn’t meant Folsaria when she said “our side.”

“Yes,” Nana replied. “The commander decided to bring in the PAF after seeing its specifications.”

“That was fast. We practically just released the specs to the public.”

Koutarou was surprised by Nefilforan’s quick decision—and rightfully so. Details about the PAF had only been released after the press conference an hour prior. That meant Nefilforan must have approved the device almost immediately upon seeing it.

“Besides, it was military tech to begin with. What does she want with more of it?” Koutarou wondered aloud.

It was a valid question. The PAF was nothing more than a modification of existing military equipment. Koutarou couldn’t see what need Nefilforan would have for it. Clan, however, solved the riddle rather easily.

“The Imperial Army uses distortion field generators and power-assisted suits. But the idea of using distortion fields *as* portable power-assisted suits is quite novel,” she explained.

Indeed, it wasn’t the technology that mattered here—it was the application. It merged the concepts of two previously existing devices to create a never-before-seen product. *That* was what the military wanted.

“Master, I believe it would be very useful in the event they suddenly needed to transport heavy items,” Ruth offered.

“Like moving injured people, setting up large guns, removing obstacles and changing tires... Even I can imagine a few different uses after thinking about it,” Koutarou mused.

The PAF’s portability and ease of use were what had caught Nefilforan’s eye. They made the tool extremely handy in various emergencies.

“It would also be useful when they can’t carry a lot of gear. Powered suits are big and stand out. I could see the PAF being used

for reconnaissance, ambushes, and paratrooping,” Theia added.

“While still relying on traditional suits when defensive capacity needs to be taken into account?” Koutarou asked.

“Of course. They dominate in terms of power. The point is to choose the right equipment for the right task.”

The battle-hardy princess made a good point. Depending on the circumstances, there were several situations where the PAF could prove more viable than conventional power suits. Koutarou could see that now, and he was certain Nefilforan had seen it as well.

Meanwhile, Kiriha believed Nefilforan had primarily seen the PAF for its strategic defensive potential. “It would also be effective against magicians. If we had models equipped with oxygen tanks, they could immediately respond to gas or poison attacks,” she said.

Nana nodded at this assessment. “I believe that is what the commander is after.”

“Being able to defend against magic is a matter of life and death for normal soldiers, after all,” Koutarou replied. He realized that any men accompanying him or the girls would be up against spells—and the PAF could be the key to dealing with them.

“It could probably be used in place of a life jacket, or even an emergency space suit,” Kiriha surmised.

“Yeah... No wonder the military wants their hands on it,” said Koutarou, changing his tune. “You really made something incredible, Clan.”

“I appreciate the praise, but those are all just clever applications of the device. It’s not like I designed it with any of that in mind.”

“That’s just how progress works,” Kiriha assured her. “On Earth, vacuum tubes were created in the process of inventing light bulbs. All their other uses were, as you said, clever applications after the fact. So you should hold your head high, Clan-dono.”

“Kii... Really, I’m flattered.”

Clan was a little embarrassed, but her shy smile said she was proud too. Kiriha had specifically brought up vacuum tubes because she knew Clan had one in her room. It was an extremely diplomatic play on her part. She knew Clan would both easily understand and accept the comparison. And thanks to that, Clan puffed up her chest a little.

“By the way, Princess Nefilforan isn’t the only one who’s taken a shine to the PAF,” Ruth, who’d been staring into the computer, looked up to say with a bright expression. As a knight, she was equally proud of the PAF and Clan’s work.

“What do you mean, Ruth-san?” Koutarou asked with interest. Though he wouldn’t admit it, he enjoyed hearing people sing Clan’s praises too.

“DKI’s stock is on the rise again. The subsidiary in charge of producing medical equipment is increasing the most, but on the whole, everything is trending upward. That includes our suppliers.”

Ruth projected the data in hologram form, displaying key stocks all at once. As she’d said, DKI’s were sharply on the rise. After just one press conference, they’d nearly hit the ceiling on allowable single-day gains. There were also notable increases for DKI’s manufacturing units, who would presumably be producing the PAF, as well as any suppliers who had a history of business with DKI.

“If this continues spreading to other sectors, it could reverse the economic setbacks of the war,” Ruth predicted.

“So this is a great first step for Elle. No wonder she made sure it was such a big deal,” Koutarou remarked.

“Indeed, she’s channeling the buzz about the PAF reveal and the construction of the new Blue Knight to revitalize Forthorthe,” Theia explained in more detail.

Either announcement might not have had much effect on its own, but there would undoubtedly be people circulating to come see the new ship or try out the PAF. And people traveling meant increased use of transportation and restaurants—even shopping. Since the economy was influenced by people’s moods, Elfaria had preyed on the joyous occasion to generate both excitement and business across the solar system.

“I swear... Elle’s no ordinary woman,” Koutarou muttered as he watched the stocks skyrocket. Elfaria’s plan was so clearly a success that even a layman like Koutarou could appreciate it. He had to respect her willingness to use any and every opportunity to her country’s advantage.

“Heh. Do you understand how incredible my mother is now?” Theia asked, grinning—albeit for different reasons than Koutarou. She was pleased her mother was succeeding, of course, but she was even happier to hear Koutarou praise her. She knew little of their history together, but she loved them both dearly.

“I suppose I should expect no less from an empress... By the way, how’s construction of the new Blue Knight coming?”

Unaware of Theia’s feelings, Koutarou turned his attention to his ship. Theia didn’t mind, however. She could press him about her mother later when they were alone.

“It’s proceeding smoothly,” she replied with a smile. “The construction platform is finally finished and assembly has only just begun, so the ship is in pieces, but the project overall is about 40 percent complete.”

“So the design’s done and all the parts are in place, huh?” Koutarou remarked.

“Coordinating the building of the new Blue Knight and the unveiling of the PAF was truly superb. I have to commend Elfaria-dono,” Kiriha added. As far as she could tell, the hype would only build from here. Elfaria’s precision in aligning the two events was truly impressive.

“Your Highness, we are approaching Nefilforan’s regiment garrison,” Clan’s AI informed her via her bracelet.

“Oh, already?” said Koutarou. “We’re almost there, Nana.”

“Got it!”

Nefilforan’s garrison was merely a stop on the way, where Nana would be departing. She proceeded to gather her luggage and head for the exit.

“Wait, Nana! I’d like to give you a PAF! Please make good use of it!” Clan called after her.

Since Nana had artificial limbs, Clan thought the device would be a welcome gift for Nana. Nana, however, shook her head.

“I appreciate the thought, but please give it to somebody who really needs it. You probably need as many as you can get right now, and I already have a body that was custom-built for me,” she said.

Her smile was strong but gentle, like that of an angel. It would have charmed anyone who saw it. Even Clan faltered for a moment.

“B-But surely it’s inconvenient to remove your limbs to bathe and things...” she stammered.

She’d specifically thought the PAF would be useful for Nana in her everyday life. There was no denying that, in fact. But nevertheless, Nana shook her head again.

“I’ll be counting on help from Yurika-chan and the others. Lately I’ve come to realize that it’s okay to rely on them—moreover, that their help is a blessing.”

In the face of Nana’s unrelenting smile, Clan backed down. “I see... In that case, I suppose you don’t need it. I’m sorry for holding you up, Nana.”

“Don’t be. I’m honored you’d worry about me. But with that, I’ll be off, everyone!” Nana bowed one last time and exited the vehicle.

Theia stared at the hatch even after it closed behind her. Nana had made quite an impression. “That’s a former prodigious magical girl for you... How admirable.”

“Heeheehee, yup! That’s my master!” Yurika squealed as if she’d been praised herself. She’d be more than happy to help Nana bathe, or anything else she needed.

“She both looks *and* acts like an angel. That’s cheating,” Shizuka lamented with a sigh. She felt defeated after seeing Nana. She had to wonder how a girl so pure—even if she was older—could even exist.

“She has plenty to worry about too, Landlord-san,” Koutarou

reminded her. He knew that Nana wasn't always so perfect. She got scared and upset too. Like Shizuka, she was really just searching for her own path in life.

Hearing this, however, Shizuka quietly stared at Koutarou. She hadn't failed to notice the fond glance Nana had given him as she left. It made her wonder if Yurika wasn't the only one present that Nana wouldn't have minded getting a bath from.

"What's the matter?" Koutarou asked.

"Oh, nothing..." Shizuka replied. Yet despite her words, there was a slight pout on her face. She wasn't entirely pleased with Koutarou.



But her dissatisfaction wouldn't last, for his next words blew it away: "Besides, you're just like her at times, Landlord-san."

"R-Really?! Do you really think so, Satomi-kun?!"

"Yeah, you just can't see it for yourself. It'd be a totally different story if you could."

Nana looked like an angel, but she was none the wiser about it. If it was something she did on purpose, Koutarou thought, then it would merely be an act. He felt the same way about Shizuka too. The fact that she was unaware of her angelic qualities was only a testament to how genuine they were.

"Oooh, you, Satomi-kun! C'mon!"

Shizuka suddenly slapped Koutarou's back. The unexpected blow from her strong arm knocked the wind right out of his lungs.

"Agh!"

"Everyone's listening, so don't say such embarrassing stuff! Jeeeee!"

"Ouch, Landlord-san..."

"Koutarou, you have a red handprint on your back," Sanae informed him.

Shizuka's emotions had been running wild when she'd swung her arm, unable to hold back. So when Sanae peeked inside Koutarou's clothes, she clearly saw the red mark the blow had left. Still, it was a sign that Shizuka was in a better mood, so Koutarou decided to let it go.

"Hey, Kotori..." Kenji piped up.

"What is it, Nii-san?" she answered.

"No matter how you look at it—"

He *wanted* to point out Koutarou's overly friendly vibe with the girls. No matter how you looked at it, they carried on like he was dating them all—exactly the behavior that had earned Kenji his sister's scorn. He wanted to know why, exactly, Koutarou was such a special exception. Before the words could leave his mouth, however, he stopped himself when a terrible premonition flashed through his mind.

"No matter how you look at it, that building has to be at least two kilometers high."

"What? Wow, you're right! It's so tall!"

He put his tact to work and said something else entirely. He wasn't foolish enough to destroy the trust they'd rebuilt by saying something stupid. It was a good call.

Ralgwin's forces had made it to Forthorthe two weeks ahead of the Corona House crew. Upon their arrival, Fasta left her commander's

side and traveled to an agrarian planet in a faraway star system.

“Sorry, we don’t want you around here,” she muttered before taking casual aim with her rifle.

The bullet she fired traveled over a kilometer and struck the ground in front of an endemic creature not dissimilar to a hyena. The bullet then cracked open with a loud sound, and red smoke began filling the air. Fasta had used a special round meant to scare off animals or serve as a warning shot. Startled, the hyena ran back to its pack, and the lot of them dove into the brush they’d emerged from. Fasta fired two more shots in that direction. The brush shook, then fell still. The hyenas had retreated into the forest beyond.

“Good... And don’t come back.”

This was Fasta’s mission. After chasing off the animals encroaching on the farm, she was to walk around and inspect it for damage. In other words, she was functionally a ranger. The farm where she was stationed wasn’t even affiliated with Ralgwin in any way. It was a perfectly normal civilian business.

“I saw that, Fasta-san. You’ve got great aim for someone so young,” an old man walking down the farm road called, greeting her with a smile.

Fasta lowered her rifle. “Thank you very much,” she said, smiling back and bowing.

Fasta had been at the farm for a week now. The farm itself was automated, so the old man and his wife were enough to run the facility, but as they’d aged, they’d begun to have trouble watching over the grounds alone. That was why they’d posted an ad for the job and how they’d subsequently found Fasta.

“It seems we’ll be able to keep going for a few more years thanks to you,” the old man said.

“Hardly. Please keep up the good work,” Fasta replied. “But I’ll support you in any little way that I can.”

“Ohoho, I’m tickled... I guess since His Excellency the Blue Knight is cooking up something nice, I can hang in there.”

“What about the Blue Knight?”

“Haven’t you seen the news? Ohoho, you really do get lost in your work, Fasta-san.”

The old man pulled out a mobile terminal to project the latest news for Fasta. All stations were covering the same story, except for Fornorn Culture, which stubbornly stuck to broadcasting children’s cartoons. Other than that, everyone was running footage of the Blue Knight.

“What’s going on?” Fasta asked.

“His Excellency returned to Forthorthe to debut some new kind of medical device,” the farmer explained, fiddling with his terminal to

bring up a video of the device in question.

Is that... a distortion field generator that's been modified to function as a portable power-assisted suit?

As a military woman, Fasta identified the device on sight. The various modifications meant it wasn't as powerful as a normal barrier generator, but it was easy to carry and versatile. It was a breakthrough in power-assisted equipment.

"With one of those," the farmer began, "I could work a little longer."

"With one of these, you might not need me anymore," Fasta replied.

"Ohoho, after seeing you shoot, I doubt that. I don't think His Excellency's invention will help my aim any."

"Then I'm glad I did all that target practice."

"You can say that again!"

After that, Fasta and the farmer began walking. With the sun already starting to set, their surroundings were growing dim. It would soon be time for dinner, and the farmer's wife was cooking for them. The elderly couple had taken a liking to Fasta, so even if they got PAFs, they had no intention of saying goodbye to her. They were happy to have her around.

So the Blue Knight has finally come after us. Is this invention meant to distract the citizens and Ralgwin-sama? Either way, if the Blue Knight's back in Forthorthe, then...

However, Fasta was thinking the exact opposite. The night she learned of the Blue Knight's return, she secretly arranged for a ticket to Planet Forthorthe. There was something she needed to do.

The Cause of the Uproar

Sunday, September 25th

When it came to tourism, Forthorthe was more than prepared to welcome extraplanetary visitors. They had all kinds of procedures in place, including an advanced decontamination system that rarely kept anyone quarantined. Pets, however, were a different story. Snoozy was the first feline to fly from Earth to Forthorthe, and no one knew if the standard decontamination process was effective on cats. He therefore had to undergo a more rigorous process applied to alien life-forms and wasn't released until the day after the group's arrival.

Following the quarantine period and all necessary medical exams, Maki greeted Snoozy cheerfully when she picked him up. "Aren't you glad that there was nothing to worry about?"

"Meow!" Snoozy responded, similarly in high spirits. Even if they'd only been separated for a day, he'd been lonely and anxious without his master. But there was something else on his mind too.

"You'll have to wait a little longer for dinner. I'll feed you once we get back to the others."

"Meow."

Maki, an indigo magician who could peer into the hearts of others without having to cast a spell, had correctly intuited that Snoozy was hungry. While he was happy to see her, he was also excited about the prospect of food.

"Can't you be a little happier to see me?"

"Meow..."

As Maki talked to her cat, she exited the immigration building near the spaceport. Koutarou and the others were already at the palace, which was about twenty minutes away on foot. Maki easily could have called for transportation to shorten the trip, but because she wanted to see the sights, she'd chosen to walk.

As she set off, a mild-looking woman in a Forthorthian-style business suit called out to her. "Um, excuse me!"

"Yes?" Maki replied.

"I represent the press over there."

"The press?" Maki looked in the direction the woman was pointing and saw a group of people watching on from afar. If the woman was telling the truth, they were all reporters.

"We were hoping you'd agree to a short interview, but please let

us know if there's a better time for you," the woman continued.

Forthorthian media had long been debated and discussed. Given Forthorthe's chivalric history, the nation wanted their press to be upstanding and honorable. It was considered standard practice to be respectful with interviewees. That was why the woman wasn't hounding Maki and why none of the reporters were filming without her permission.

"Why would you want to interview me?" Maki asked. She didn't particularly mind, but she wasn't sure why the reporters wanted to talk to her specifically.

"You're a member of His Excellency's band, so all of Forthorthe would love to know more about you... as well as that kitten from Earth."

Footage of the Satomi knights' treasurer had been broadcast all across Forthorthe, and reporters had been keen to identify Maki. They were curious about both her and her animal companion.

"I can understand your interest in me, but what about Snoozy?" Maki asked.

"You may not be aware, but this cat is featured in videos of His Excellency from Earth every now and again. He's developed quite a fan base."

Maki was a Satomi knight, and Snoozy was the kitten the Blue Knight personally adored. Forthorthe was intensely interested in both of them.

In the end, Maki agreed to the interview, which lasted about fifteen minutes. Afterward, the reporters gave her a ride to the palace—another display of their courtesy—so the whole ordeal took no longer than it would have to walk there.

"...And then they brought me here. They apparently had business near the palace too," Maki finished explaining to everyone.

"At the Fornorn stock exchange, most likely. DKI Medical and related stocks have been the top news story since yesterday," Ruth responded as she offered Snoozy some chicken jerky. He recognized her as a provider of food, so he began chewing on the jerky without even sniffing it first. Ruth smiled as she watched over him.

"I knew Snoozy would be popular," Theia said proudly as she wiggled a stick with a toy mouse attached to it. She'd long suspected Snoozy would be a hit.

"To be honest, I didn't see it coming myself," Maki replied with an almost apologetic smile. She'd always thought Theia was exaggerating.

"You underestimate Snoozy's charm," Theia informed her.

"Meow!"

As he was finishing up his jerky, Snoozy heard Theia say his name. When he looked up, he noticed the toy in her hand. Coming to the conclusion that Theia wanted to play, he pranced right over to the princess.

“This little guy is a natural star.”

Theia swished the stick back and forth as Snoozy approached. When she did, the mouse on the end moved as if it were alive and running around. Snoozy instantly pounced.

“Meow!”

“I think Satomi-kun has a lot to do with Snoozy’s popularity,” confessed Maki.

“Even without Koutarou as a chaperone, Snoozy was born to be a star. Just as I was born to be a ruler,” Theia argued.

“I’m just a chaperone, huh?” Koutarou muttered, laughing under his breath at Theia’s choice of words.

As Theia continued to wiggle the toy, Snoozy scampered up Koutarou’s broad back and finally managed to snatch the mouse.

“More like a stepping stone,” Theia replied.

“I guess that’s all I am to a cat,” Koutarou grumbled.

“Then I’m probably just the person in charge of food,” Maki threw in with a smile.

Cats, Snoozy included, cared not for human ceremony. Koutarou was merely a boy who played with him, and Maki was a provider of meals. All he cared about was their relationship to him.

“I bet he only sees Theia as a runt,” Koutarou laughed.

“...Are you trying to pick a fight?”

“Your self-control is itty-bitty too.”

“Let me show you how terrifying a runt can be!”

With that, Theia leaped at Koutarou like Snoozy going after the mouse toy. The two of them then began trading blows. It was how they always roughhoused, so no one batted an eye. Their brawl, however, brought the conversation about Snoozy and Maki to a natural halt.

“By the way, about DKI Medical...” Kiriha took the opportunity to bring up a new topic. “It looks like there’s another buying frenzy today.”

“So it’s still going strong, is it?” Harumi replied. She was enviously watching Theia tussle with Koutarou, but she was also deeply interested in news pertaining to the PAF, which was an important invention to her personally. “Isn’t that great, Clan-san?”

DKI Medical’s skyrocketing stock prices were a sign of the people’s confidence in the PAF—Clan’s handiwork. Though the bespectacled princess looked a little embarrassed, she smiled at Harumi.

“This couldn’t have happened without you either, Harumi. All of

the operational data came from the model you used.”

“I’m honored I could help.”

In a sense, the PAF had been a joint project between them, which meant a lot to Clan. Now that she’d matured, being able to work with someone was a beautiful thing to her. And seeing Harumi smile at what they’d accomplished together was like receiving a medal.

“Hopes for the PAF are the biggest reason for DKI’s soaring stocks, but there’s another reason too,” Ruth said while working on her computer. She pulled up the data for DKI Medical and projected it for the room. “DKI Medical just announced its initial production numbers and—”

“W-Wait, they’re making a billion units?!” Shizuka shouted in astonishment when she saw the number. “That’s, like, a *billion* billion, right? Isn’t that a few too many zeroes?”

“I thought the same thing at first, but I’ve counted the zeroes over and over and there’s no mistake, Shizuka-sama. They are indeed making a billion units.”

There were nine zeroes in all—in other words, one billion. And that was just for the preliminary run. Reservations already exceeded that by a wide margin, but one billion units was all DKI was capable of producing at the moment. The sheer demand for PAFs was pushing DKI Medical’s stock prices higher and higher by the hour.

“Hey, Theia...”

“Yeah, it sounds like something happened.”

Koutarou and Theia stopped moving after they heard Shizuka yell. Still grappling with one another, they hurried over to see what all the commotion was about. They took one look at the data Ruth was displaying and...

“A billion?! Wh-What gives? Are there really that many people that need them?!” Koutarou gasped, just as astonished as Shizuka. He reflexively gripped Theia tighter in his surprise.

He’d expected to see ten or a hundred thousand at most. In simple terms, the PAF was a new type of prosthetic, so he had a hard time imagining that people who already used them would just go out and buy new ones. With Forthorthe’s technology, artificial limbs were already extremely advanced, after all. And even though Forthorthe’s population was far greater than Earth’s, he’d still never imagined the initial production run would be so massive.

“Indeed, it seems the market for the PAF is much bigger than we anticipated,” Kiriha, who’d finished reading through the information, answered Koutarou. She smiled nervously—the reported numbers had outstripped even her expectations.

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“The PAF was designed with the wounded and weak in mind, but

it has many more applications. The elderly, the military, emergency personnel, miners, deep sea workers, and so on all have a use for it.”

“Ah...”

Just like Nefiloran had immediately decided to adopt the PAF for her unit, other industries had instantly seen its potential. Forthorthe had an aging population and labor shortages, so the PAF could swiftly be employed to lessen the burden. For example, say an elderly farmer needed to attach a trailer. With the help of a PAF, they could easily do it themselves. Portable power-assisted suits had applications for limitless other professions as well, such as assisting police when apprehending criminals and firefighters when entering dangerous areas.

“Not to mention Forthorthe is a superpower that covers half a galaxy. Their colossal population supports a colossal demand,” Kiriha continued.

The Forthorthian Empire hosted a population several times that of Earth. Of course Koutarou—an Earthling—had trouble getting his mind around such an astronomical number.

“What about our competition?!” he shouted. “We made the technology public, so why isn’t someone making a cheaper alternative?!”

That was an anticipated part of the plan. Koutarou had ensured the PAF wouldn’t be proprietary in order to allow other companies to manufacture similar products. He’d also taken steps to subsidize such products for the people who needed them most.

“Not as many companies have jumped on the opportunity as we thought. Mostly, they’re asking for licenses to make our version,” Kiriha reported.

Indeed, their plan to enable competition hadn’t taken off quite like they’d hoped. With the technology available to the public at no cost, Koutarou had envisioned rival companies popping up to produce and sell cheaper alternatives. But for some reason, it seemed everyone wanted *the* PAF.

“Why would they do that?!” Koutarou continued to clamor. He couldn’t understand why businesses would willingly cut into their own profits by paying the licensing fee for the original instead of just making their own versions.

“In short... everyone wants to be part of your cause,” Theia offered. “First you saved the nation, and now you’re trying to help it heal from the wounds of war.”

Other businesses were simply following in the Blue Knight’s footsteps. They were eschewing money in the name of goodwill. There was something more important at stake. The scars of the coup—both physical and economic—were still apparent on Forthorthe. The whole

nation needed to be uplifted. Profit chasing could come after that.

“So I underestimated their patriotism...” Koutarou murmured.

“You’re making a killing,” Kiriha reminded him.

“I’m so jealous,” Yurika whined.

“What’s the point in making any more money?!” he shouted.

Tons of PAFs would be manufactured—and the sale of each one would mean greater gains for DKI, which Koutarou now owned. But since he already possessed unimaginable wealth in Forthorthe, he couldn’t see any merit in making more.

“Ohoho, how foolish!” Theia scolded him. “There’s more than just patriotism at work here! The people love you! Consider this a new chapter in your legend! Many who couldn’t before will now be able to take up arms and fight!”

Many men and women had fought alongside the Blue Knight during the civil war, but they amounted to a small percentage of the population. There were several potential barriers to joining the armed services—including combat skill and age—that could now be overcome or compensated for with the PAF. Meaning there would now be many, many more people ready and willing to fight under the Blue Knight. It would indeed be the start of a new chapter in his story.

“This is part of Her Majesty’s plan, I imagine,” Kiriha said, nodding at Theia’s declaration. She’d suspected that Elfaria might be nudging the public in that direction, even if she hadn’t interfered directly.

“I can imagine my mother doing that... er... Well, either way, I’m sure that she’s happy that the hype has far exceeded expectations.”

The excitement associated with the PAF was growing in tandem with the reconstruction of Blue Knight. But a response like this had surely surpassed even Elfaria’s hopes.

“I’m going to give her a piece of my mind later!” Koutarou shouted.

He understood what Forthorthe was going through. He knew Elfaria wanted to get the economy going again. Still, he felt this was overdoing it. And he decided he was going to tell her so the next time they met.

Koutarou went to see Elfaria before dinner that night. She’d sent a summons for him, but because he had business with her as well, he readily made his way to her office of his own accord.

“I will now take my leave, Your Excellency,” said the female soldier who’d escorted him there. She then bowed and made her exit.

Koutarou made sure to thank her. Even though he outranked the escort, he was raised to be courteous. Once she was outside of the room, she bowed once more before closing the door behind her.

Koutarou stared at it for some time.

Elfaria greeted him with a question: “Did something about her catch your eye?” It was the first thing she said, and she sounded stern. She wasn’t pleased Koutarou was ignoring her.

At that, Koutarou turned to face the empress. “Not her specifically... Just that she’s an imperial guard.”

He was smiling, but Elfaria wasn’t sure why. Forgetting her displeasure, she tilted her head and asked, “What of it?”

“Well, I used to be a guard myself. Look,” said Koutarou, pointing to the left side of his breastplate.

Attached to his armor there was a wooden insignia that read “Super Important Bodyguard of Princesses Charl and Alaia.” It was a handmade decoration that Princess Charl had crafted for him personally. It accordingly looked childish, but Charl had presented it with the high honor of asking for his protection during the civil war. As such, Koutarou preferred to wear it for ceremonial occasions. He treasured it alongside Signaltin—a similar gift from Alaia.



“Heehee. You’re still an important guard even now, Layous-sama,” said Elfaria. Now that she understood what had captivated Koutarou, she flashed a bright smile. She had nothing to be upset about.

“Really? I thought I was the commander-in-chief now,” Koutarou laughed.

“That too,” Elfaria replied. “You’ve been both our captain of the imperial guard and commander-in-chief for two thousand years. That hasn’t changed.”

“Hmm, then I suppose I should act like this.” Koutarou wiped the grin off his face and stood bolt upright. He then gave Elfaria a clean salute. “Imperial Guard Captain Layous Fatra Veltlion reporting for duty.”

“Welcome, Lord Veltlion. We have much to discuss,” Elfaria said with a sharp expression.

However, the formal atmosphere didn’t last. They both burst out laughing within seconds.

“Wahahahaha! Yeah, this really doesn’t suit me.”

“It feels so silly to be so serious when it’s just the two of us, heehee.”

Koutarou and Elfaria were right back to their usual friendly banter. They were no normal knight and royal, after all. They had a special relationship, one different even from Koutarou’s close bond with Clan and Theia.

“I’m just a normal civilian at the end of the day. Being stupid suits me more than— Actually, that reminds me! We *do* need to talk, Elle!” Koutarou informed her, recalling why he’d come to her office in the first place.

“About what?” she asked.

“These stupid ‘festivities’ Forthorthe is in the middle of!”

Koutarou had a complaint or two to register about the hubbub surrounding the unveiling of the PAF and the reconstruction of Blue Knight. The commotion of the two combined had turned into a frenzy that swept the nation.

“Oh, you mean the Grand Blue Knight’s Return Event: Summertime Edition,” Elfaria commented.

“*That’s* what you’re calling it? Wait, that’s beside the point. Why make such a big deal out of it? I know we wanted to distract the public and kick-start the economy, but isn’t this kinda overkill?”

Koutarou believed the uproar was thanks to Elfaria’s meddling. He suspected she’d intentionally created hype by strategically controlling the release of information and scheduling the press conference just right. And he was correct.

“It’s true that this much might not have been necessary,” Elfaria

admitted.

“So what gives?” Koutarou pressed her.

“The rub is that I have no way of gauging the scale of the battle ahead of us. It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Elfaria was still smiling, but Koutarou felt a poignance in her expression. This was the face of an empress, and it was a countenance she wore when she or the royal families were faced with great crises.

“You mean settling the score with Ralgwin and the remnants of Vandarion’s faction?” Koutarou asked.

“I do. Our greatest concern is that we don’t have a handle on their numbers. Moreover, any and all preparations we make need to be kept strictly confidential.”

Upon Vandarion’s defeat, most of his forces had surrendered. The rightful Forthorthian government under Elfaria’s restored rule had then routed the majority of their holdouts. But some still remained—and Elfaria had no way of knowing how many. That was the problem.

“Things *do* get tricky when some of them get away...” Koutarou muttered.

He knew that painful truth all too well after tangling with Ralgwin’s forces several times now. They were a guerrilla force rather than a proper army, so they could regroup quickly if even a few of them escaped. To put a stop to them once and for all, Forthorthe would need to take care of them and their leader in one fell swoop. And to accomplish that, Forthorthe would need to keep its plan of attack a closely guarded secret.

“You’ll need to round them up,” Elfaria explained accordingly.

“And all this commotion is to that end?” Koutarou asked.

“Indeed. We’ll use the sudden boom in transportation and logistics to move the Imperial Army covertly. Ralgwin will be none the wiser. You should be able to move freely as well, Layous-sama. Even if you travel, no one would dream it’s for war.”

Against an enemy of unknown size, Elfaria believed that bigger was better. That was why she’d drummed up so much anticipation and business surrounding the Blue Knight’s return. The commotion made it easy for her to deploy the Imperial Army for a decisive strike.

“So that’s what you were thinking. I was sure that you...”

Koutarou shut his mouth midsentence.

“That I what?” Elfaria inquired, giving him a pout and sidelong glance. She looked almost like Theia.

Relenting, Koutarou confessed, “I was sure that you just wanted to enjoy the revelry.”

When she heard Koutarou say that, Elfaria’s pout transformed into a smile. That composure was what set her apart from her daughter.

“Heehee, well, I won’t say that *wasn’t* part of it.”

“Give me a break, Elle...”

“This is *your* fault, Layous-sama,” Elfaria said, pouting once more.

“Me? How?” he protested.

“You’ve shown me what a true hero is like. In spite of all you’ve accomplished and earned here, you left without a second thought for what that would do to Forthorthe. We didn’t even have a chance to thank you.”

“I didn’t stay because I knew my presence *would* affect Forthorthe.”

“We *want* to be affected by you, Layous-sama. Even if it’s for the worse. But your return has been nothing but a boon, so of course the people are excited.”

The people of Forthorthe wanted to thank and celebrate their savior. They wanted to work toward a better future together. But the Blue Knight had denied them that opportunity... Or so everyone had thought until now. The Blue Knight had returned, and now he was trying to save Forthorthe economically. Everyone wanted to be a part of his business.

“Even without my involvement, the result would have been the same,” Elfaria insisted.

It was true she’d cast the first sparks. For example, she hadn’t denied suspicions that the Blue Knight was returning to marry a princess. And that fire had caught, growing larger and larger. In fact, it had become a greater blaze than even she had anticipated. An initial production run of a billion units for the PAF was unbelievable. Nevertheless, she was sure it would have happened eventually—with or without her help.

“I’m not so sure,” Koutarou muttered, unconvinced. He didn’t think he was worth that much.

“That’s not all there is to it, Layous-sama... You refuse to use the salary that Empress Alaia left you, so they’re hoping that funneling money to you this way will help get you to rebuild the country. That’s what they’re after.”

Koutarou couldn’t ignore DKI’s profits the same way he could his legacy wealth. If he refused to do anything with such a staggering sum, Forthorthe’s entire economy would stagnate. That left him no choice but to use the money, and the citizens were already dreaming of new projects like the PAF. As Elfaria said, they had high hopes for him.

“I don’t know anything about business, though,” Koutarou sighed.

He’d just so happened to have the PAF ready to unveil this time—he’d never even considered potential future projects. Still, he couldn’t let DKI’s profit sit around and collect dust when the goal at hand was to rejuvenate the economy. It was unthinkable. Koutarou was

stumped.

“That’s quite a weight on your shoulders,” said Elfaria.

“Don’t act like it has nothing to do with you,” Koutarou snapped.

“You can’t always rely on me,” Elfaria replied with a hint of bitterness.

As the empress of a galactic empire, she knew if she and Koutarou acted in concert that their influences would eventually merge, becoming a force capable of turning the entire universe upside down. That was why Koutarou officially kept his distance from her. She understood that... but deep down, she didn’t want to. She longed for the days of twenty years ago, when they were merely a boy and a girl rather than a hero and empress.

“This is different, Elle. Lend me a hand,” Koutarou implored her.

He understood the complexities of the situation, but he also understood this warranted breaking his own personal rules. There was too much at stake. He was sure Kiriha and Clan would be able to come up with a plan eventually, but time was of the essence right now. They needed this boom to set the stage for the coming battle and reinvigorate the economy.

“Oh my...” Elfaria went wide-eyed at Koutarou’s entreaty, but only for a moment. “Of course. I’ll always be on your side, Layous-sama.”

Saying that, Elfaria nodded with a bright smile. It reminded Koutarou of how she’d looked twenty years ago. She’d smiled just the same back then.

“The hitch is that I’m always worried about what your help is going to cost me,” Koutarou muttered, looking away. If he stared at Elfaria any longer, he knew he’d be sucked in.

“You should be,” she said, sounding quite pleased. She seemed to understand why Koutarou had averted his eyes.

“Don’t admit it,” he scolded her.

“Don’t worry. I’ll earn my keep,” she replied.

“Oh yeah? How?”

“Hmm, let’s see... What if I found Ralgwin’s stronghold?”

“Wh-Whaaat?!” Koutarou’s eyes shot wide open as he whipped back around to look at Elfaria.

Her enchanting smile had already been replaced with a mischievous grin. “That’s actually why I summoned you,” she explained.

“You should’ve said so from the start!”

“We only know its location. We still need more information before taking action, so even though I wanted to share this with you today, we’re in no hurry to act,” Elfaria continued calmly.

Following that, there was a sudden knock at the door.

“You may enter,” Elfaria answered.

“Pardon me.” The door opened and Ceilēshu stepped inside. She gracefully bowed to Elfaria and Koutarou. “It has been some time, Layous-sama.”

“It certainly has, Princess Ceilēshu.” Koutarou returned the bow, then looked back and forth between the empress and princess.

Puzzled by this, Elfaria cocked her head. “Is something the matter, Layous-sama?”

“I was just thinking that you and Theia could learn a lot from Princess Ceilēshu. She has this refined aura and she’s always so polite... Nothing like you two.”

“Says the man who always laughs when I act serious!” Elfaria shouted. “You’re just teasing me, aren’t you?!”

“Yeah.”

Ceilēshu giggled at their back-and-forth. She could tell they had a special relationship.

And yet, Layous-sama probably doesn’t understand just what’s making the empress behave in such an un-empresslike fashion...

If Elfaria so desired, she could comport herself with all the dignity required of an empress. She was even more graceful than Ceilēshu. She simply chose not to be. Either she felt the situation didn’t require it—or there was a deeper reason behind it. Koutarou believed it to be the former, but in truth, it was the latter.

“Look, even Princess Ceilēshu is laughing,” Koutarou continued.

“We can finish this later, Layous-sama—at our leisure,” Elfaria insisted.

“Yeah, no thanks,” Koutarou laughed.

Despite the banter, Koutarou, Elfaria, and Ceilēshu all understood the gravity of their meeting. They soon stopped smiling and put on their game faces.

“Three days ago, a large stronghold believed to belong to Ralgwin’s forces was discovered in Ikoran, the fourth planet in the Dalgamaran system,” explained Ceilēshu as she used her computer to bring up a star chart.

On display was a solar system three days’ warp away from Forthorthe. Seven planets orbited its central star. The fourth was habitable, and that was where the supposed base had been discovered.

“They’re just three warps away? That’s surprisingly close,” Koutarou remarked.

It took a royal-class battleship ten warps across as many days to get from Forthorthe to Earth. Compared to that, three days to Dalgamaran wasn’t far at all. To Koutarou, that was no different than a long road trip without using the expressway.

“Three warps?” Elfaria crossed her arms and groaned. “What a clever location.”

“What do you mean?” Koutarou asked.

“The most convenient warp routes see the most traffic, of course, and Ralgwin set up one warp beyond those just for good measure. It made them much harder to find, but it’s still easy for them to detect approaching enemies.”

Given the margin of error in warp travel, large sections of open space were frequently used as way stations of a sort. And since they were well traveled, a base near one would have been all too easy to find. Large stops of that nature could be avoided with shorter, more precise warps—but too many would make it more convenient simply to set up in a remote region of space. A planet three days’ warp away was thus the perfect compromise. It was indeed a clever location.

“It took us quite a while, and it was only thanks to the assistance of the court magicians,” Ceilēshu continued to explain.

She agreed with Elfaria’s assessment. Forthorthe had been searching for Ralgwin ever since Koutarou first reported his appearance on Earth, and they’d only just uncovered his stronghold. The court magicians—formerly Darkness Rainbow—had discovered it between their magic and intelligence they’d gathered from crushing smaller bases.

“If they found it... Your Highness, does that mean there’s magic or spiritual energy involved?” Koutarou asked hesitantly.

“That’s correct. It appears the facility is manufacturing spiritual energy technology. It’s a large refinery,” Ceilēshu answered.

“Ikoran was originally a mining planet, I believe,” Elfaria added. “Considering the timing of all this, I doubt Ralgwin has built a new mine. He probably just found one capable of producing the ores he needed.”

The stronghold in question was massive. It was hard to believe Ralgwin had built it since the coup. The construction itself wouldn’t have been an issue given his resources, but the appearance of a new mine would have undoubtedly gotten unwanted attention. It was safe to assume Ralgwin had taken over an existing one instead.

“The question remains what kind of troops they have in there,” Koutarou muttered.

“That’s still under investigation. We can’t say for sure... but based on the large cannons surrounding the facility, we believe their forces to be considerable,” Ceilēshu reported.

Unless Ralgwin was a fool, he wouldn’t put up heavy artillery to protect an unmanned base. There was presumably a force inside commensurate with its defenses.

“The reverse could also be said,” Elfaria threw in. “Losing this stronghold would be both a huge practical and military setback for Ralgwin.”

“So he has a large force there to defend the base and vice versa,” Koutarou summarized.

A large-scale production facility like this was no doubt a key part of Ralgwin’s plans for the future. He’d likely invested manpower enough to defend it appropriately. Still, the fact remained that Ralgwin’s biggest constraint was a limited supply of troops. If he lost his men and his mine in one fell swoop, it would be a fatal blow indeed.

“If we don’t want them to escape, we’ll need to take them by surprise,” said Koutarou.

Taking Ralgwin and his rebels down for good would require defeating or capturing them all. They couldn’t let remnants wriggle away and regroup again. Taking the stronghold should also yield enough information to weed out any other remaining outposts.

“A swift, stealthy strike would result in the fewest casualties. The majority of the workers present most likely have no idea what’s transpiring,” said Ceilēshu.

Ralgwin surely had critical and classified parts of the facility staffed by his own men, but the rest would be run by local miners and factory workers. Koutarou and company wanted to avoid any collateral damage among them. And aiming straight for the heart of the enemy was the most effective way to ensure that.

“If this is a stealth operation, we need a small, elite team... so Princess Nefilforan and I will do it,” Koutarou volunteered.

“If possible, I would love to keep you out of this, Layous-sama,” Elfaria said apologetically. She wanted to leave the job to the Imperial Army, who’d crushed Ralgwin’s smaller bases previously. But there was a reason that wouldn’t work this time.

“This is their stronghold,” Koutarou reminded her. “The soldiers there will have magic and spiritual energy weaponry. If I don’t go, there are going to be mass casualties.”

If a normal unit crossed paths with spiritual energy weapons or Grevanas’s magic unprepared, it would be a deadly encounter indeed. That was why Koutarou and the rest of the Corona House crew—who were equipped to deal with them—had to step up to the plate. Koutarou knew they were the team for the job. He’d known that all along and didn’t hold it against Elfaria.

“Besides, if we go, then we might be able to learn more,” Koutarou encouraged her. That was another reason he thought they were the right team for the job. Sanae, Yurika, or Clan might be able to uncover new intel.

“We’re in your hands, Layous-sama...”

Though Elfaria had no desire to see Koutarou put in harm’s way, she understood it was unavoidable. She thus fought back the urge to

beg him not to go.

Ralgwin's Miscalculation

Thursday, September 29th

Dalgamaran lay slightly off a frequent warp route, but it had once been a major shipping hub. The system had had its heyday in the early period of Forthorthe's space age, when warp technology was in its infancy. The system was rich in minerals, making it an ideal location to develop. Its fourth planet, Ikoran, was especially integral in that development. With minimal terraforming, it was habitable for humans without spacesuits.

But with the passage of time had come advancements in warp technology, making it easy to bypass the system completely. Thanks to that, Dalgamaran had waned. Nowadays, only spaceships trading in minerals passed through. If a battleship approached the system, it would be a clear and obvious declaration of attack.

"So our force is traveling by cargo ship. I guess there are plenty on the move right now," Koutarou muttered, smirking in both admiration and exasperation.

He and the rest of the Corona House crew were currently en route to Ikoran alongside Nefilforan's unit. Koutarou and the girls were aboard the Hazy Moon, while Nefilforan and her troops were split up among several transport vessels belonging to different companies acquired by DKI behind the scenes. The Hazy Moon's incredible stealth abilities allowed it to travel without notice, but Nefilforan had had to forgo the use of her own personal battleship, Hidden Leaves.

"Her Majesty's strategic insight is most incredible. She must have begun preparing even before hearing of your return," Kiriha remarked.

She was honestly impressed. Elfaria had shifted gears after hearing about the PAF, although she'd undoubtedly had a plan all along. Things wouldn't have worked out so perfectly otherwise.

"That's my mother for you. Ever the strategist," said Theia.

"You got lucky, Veltlion," added Clan.

"Huh? How so?"

"If not for the PAF, you would have been cornered into a marriage," Clan concluded after hearing what Kiriha said.

If Elfaria had truly been planning for battle prior to Koutarou's return, that would explain why she'd sown the seeds of rumors about his marriage. That was her original idea to stir up the public and give

them a reason to celebrate.

“Whaaaaaaaat?!” Koutarou hollered.

“Blue Knight’s reconstruction alone wouldn’t be enough, after all,” said Clan.

Economically speaking, the new Blue Knight and economic reform might have been enough to get Forthorthe back on track. In order to secure a cover for the mass deployment of transport ships, however, Elfaria had needed an even bigger excuse. The PAF had given her exactly that, but without it, she would have arranged the Blue Knight’s wedding. It didn’t even matter who his bride might be. That was Clan’s theory, and it was frighteningly believable.

“I can’t believe it! What was Elle thinking?!” This is what I get as soon as I praise her a little!” Koutarou continued to shout.

“Master, do you really hate the idea of marrying one of us that much?” Ruth asked, worry visible on her face. She was troubled to see how angry Koutarou was.

“Th-That’s not really what I meant. I just don’t like the ulterior motive.”

“That’s true. I wouldn’t want to marry because of a battle either,” Ruth replied, smiling with relief. It wasn’t that Koutarou was against marriage—he just wanted to do it properly, and that made her happy.

“I’m going to give Elle a piece of my mind after this,” Koutarou grumbled.

“We need to win this battle first,” Harumi said as she looked at a hologram. The stronghold wasn’t yet in view, but the fight ahead was swiftly approaching.

“Sorry, but we should get back on topic,” Kiriha interjected to get things back on track. Naturally, no one objected. “While Nefilforan’s unit is creating a diversion, we will approach and storm the enemy’s command center.”

“They’d notice a transport ship getting too close, so we’re closing in with the Hazy Moon to launch the main attack, right?” Koutarou summarized.

He and the girls would be in charge of striking a decisive blow while Nefilforan distracted Ralgwin and his men. The transport ships would approach and surround the stronghold, then unleash their forces. While the enemy was preoccupied with that, Koutarou and the girls would stealthily disembark from the Hazy Moon right over the heart of the stronghold.

“That’s right,” Theia confirmed. “Nefilforan’s unit will also be surrounding the place to make sure no high-ranking officers with critical intel escape.”

Rather than playing an offensive role in the operation, Nefilforan was shoring up the team’s defenses. She’d been tasked with the

difficult mission of holding the line around the stronghold. It was a job only she and her men could do, so Koutarou had obligingly left it to them while spearheading the main strike with the other girls.

“You can bet the soldiers protecting the command room have magic or spiritual energy technology too, so leaving the assault to us makes sense,” Koutarou mused.

Nefilforan’s unit had now trained against combat magic and spiritual energy weapons, but Koutarou and the girls had far more experience with them. The operation thus played to their strengths.

“Lord Veltlion!” Nefilforan suddenly called in over the comms.

Her tense voice reverberated across the Hazy Moon’s bridge. She’d skipped her usual formal greeting, so Koutarou knew immediately that something was wrong.

“What’s the matter, Princess Nefilforan?” he responded.

“Take a look at this footage from one of our cameras!” she cried.

Nefilforan’s transport ships were some distance ahead of the Hazy Moon. They now had a visual on Ralgwin’s stronghold, and she relayed the video feed to the Hazy Moon. Koutarou could hardly believe his eyes.

“It’s on fire?!”

Indeed, red fire and black smoke billowed from the refinery attached to the mine. They spread wide, threatening to consume the whole facility.

Spiritual energy technology was integral to Grevanas’s ultimate goal of reviving Maxfern. He needed to reconstruct his fallen lord’s soul, and doing that with magic alone was an impossible task. Magic was capable of almost anything—but there was a limit to what Grevanas could do by himself. Spiritual energy tech would give him the edge he needed. It connected directly to the soul, which the People of the Earth understood even better than magicians.

Grevanas had accordingly come to Ikoran to broaden his own understanding of spiritual energy technology. He was desperate to learn anything that might help restore Maxfern’s soul, so he’d asked for a tour of Ralgwin’s factory.

“These crystals are made from refining ore from the adjacent mine. Effectively, they’re batteries for storing spiritual energy,” his guide explained to him.

“So they’re a key component for spiritual energy technology,” Grevanas observed.

“Yes. With these, even people without psychic powers can use spiritual energy,” the guide explained. “The People of the Earth also use them as vessels for the artificial souls of automatons.”

“A vessel for artificial souls...? Tell me more about that.”

“Of course, Grevanas-sama. Right this way, please.”

One of Ralgwin’s subordinates was showing Grevanas the factory. He knew Grevanas was undead, but in order to prevent panic in the facility, Grevanas had cast an illusion on himself to appear as he had in life.

If not for my alliance with Ralgwin-dono, this would have been considerably more difficult... I shall thus continue our partnership for the time being.

Grevanas only needed a simple illusion to fool the factory at large. But if anyone other than Ralgwin’s subordinate—who knew his secret—had served as his tour guide, the old wizard would have needed a much more powerful spell to fool someone he’d be in such close contact with for a prolonged period of time. Similarly, Grevanas would have had a much harder time getting his hands on spiritual energy tech without Ralgwin’s help. Grevanas appreciated that. He knew he could always use magic to manipulate Ralgwin directly if he needed to, but that would require much more effort than simply working together.

“These are the automatons that the People of the Earth use. Their exteriors are completely cosmetic, but underground dwellers prefer to model them after traditional objects of worship,” the guide explained.

“It might be the other way around,” Grevanas interjected.

“Huh?”

“Perhaps the souls prefer these forms.”

“Ah, so that’s what you meant. You very well may be right.”

“In the early days of the technology, artificial souls were probably stabilized by external spiritual energy directed to them,” Grevanas speculated.

“I see,” the guide mused. “We’ll take that into account when we try to replicate this technology.”

Grevanas learned more and more as they proceeded through the factory. He already had an advanced understanding of the mind and necromancy, so he was quick to catch on with spiritual energy. His guide was frequently left flabbergasted. Grevanas was also picking up more about industrial technology and manufacturing, although in a more generalized sense. He’d yet to master modern science, after all. He was such an avid learner, however, that it was only a matter of time.

“Don’t these move?” he asked about the automatons.

“These are being dismantled for technical analysis. The operational units are currently being tested for combat over at the base,” the guide explained.

“It’s easy to miss what’s right under your nose, I suppose. When I return to the base, I shall have a look at them.”

“I’ll notify the person in charge.”

Grevanas had been touring the factory for nearly half the day when the computer in the guide’s hand began blaring an alarm. It wasn’t the normal notification sound either. It was the signal for an emergency.

“What is it? What’s happened?” Grevanas demanded.

“Th-The Imperial Army has discovered us!” the guide replied.

The emergency notification was the message that the army was approaching. On the Gray Knight’s advice, Ralgwin had enhanced surveillance, and several transport ships had just been detected. They appeared to be perfectly normal cargo vessels... but they were all veering off their registered routes. And there was nothing wrong at the local spaceport. It was unthinkable that a group of ships had all accidentally taken the same wrong turn at the same time. There was no doubt they were undercover army ships.

“So they’re here already... Prepare to attack,” Grevanas ordered.

“R-Right!”

In addition to surveillance, Ralgwin had also enhanced the facility’s defenses. He’d known there was a chance the enemy might come, and he wanted to be prepared. Since the Blue Knight’s arrival in Forthorthe, he’d doubled the stronghold’s already sizable forces. It was now armed to the teeth. As long as they kept their cool, they could repel an entire regiment... But that wasn’t in the cards, for a sudden explosion shook the entire facility.

“What now?! Are we under attack already?!” Grevanas immediately assumed the enemy was upon them.

But his guide shook his head. “No, it was an accident! Part of the refinery has collapsed!”

The explosion was apparently a factory accident. A section of the line refining ore into crystals had blown up. Reports were coming in one after another of mass casualties.

“An accident?! That would be truly tragic at a time like this. No, we can use this... Have the uninjured retreat. That includes everyone here,” Grevanas commanded. With the enemy closing in on them, he’d made the swift decision to withdraw when he heard the grim reports. If a battle broke out now, the chaos would prevent them from putting up much of a fight.

“But there are still so many people in the collapsing zone!” the guide objected. He’d dutifully followed Grevanas’s orders before now, but he couldn’t this time. He couldn’t just abandon his comrades in danger.

“We can’t rescue anyone right now! To do that, we need to retreat and regroup! If you want to save your comrades, then hurry!” Grevanas argued back.

“Y-Yes, sir!”

In the end, the guide heeded Grevanas. The damage to the factory was so extensive that there was no denying what the old wizard had said. They’d need to regroup to organize any meaningful rescue effort.

As the Hazy Moon approached Ikoran, its cameras relayed a clearer picture of the devastated factory. There had been an explosion deep within the facility that blew away the roof. The interior of the building was now exposed, but no one could see through the fire and smoke billowing out.

“What in the world?!” Koutarou couldn’t hide his surprise as he beheld the flaming factory.

Ralgwin’s forces weren’t fanatical enough to blow up their own stronghold just because the army was upon them. The facility was reproducing technology they’d stolen from the People of the Earth, so it wasn’t like they had anything proprietary to protect by getting rid of the evidence. Critical intel was a different story, but it didn’t make sense to destroy the entire factory just for that. All Koutarou could assume was that there’d been a tragic accident.

“I know what happened!” Clan called in answer. “Based on the temperature of the flames, there was some kind of chemical combustion!”

The tech savvy princess had run all of her observation equipment and concluded that they were dealing with a chemical fire. The conflagration was far hotter than any normal fire, and the billowing black smoke contained complex compounds. A tank storing chemicals had to be burning somewhere.

“Master, it appears the factory is in a panic. The employees are lining up to escape,” Ruth reported.

“This is no time to attack them,” Koutarou lamented. “What do you make of this, Kiriha-san?”

“If I were one of Ralgwin’s soldiers, I would use the panic to escape. However, we’re in no position to chase them down. We should immediately contact the local fire department and help put out the blaze. Chemical fires are messy.”

Even if Ralgwin’s own men hadn’t started the fire, they’d all be desperate to get away from it. And if they fled amid the chaos, Koutarou and the others couldn’t catch them. Instead, Kiriha wanted to focus on rescuing civilians. She understood just how dangerous chemical fires were.

“Sounds like a plan,” Koutarou replied. “Are you cool with that, Theia?”

“I am! It is a royal’s duty to protect their citizens—even if that means having to take the long way around sometimes!”

Koutarou and Theia had no objections to Kiriha's idea. At the rate the fire was going, doing nothing would only mean more deaths. A knight and princess couldn't leave innocent people to perish while they chased down Ralgwin's men. They both took after Alaia in that regard.

"Hold on!" someone called, stopping them both in their tracks.

"What is it, Sanae?" Koutarou asked.

"Something's strange... There's lots of this kinda wriggling thing. And it's on the move!"

Specifically, it was Sanae-chan who'd yelled out. She had a serious look on her face as she stared at not the monitor, but a wall in the direction of the factory. She was looking beyond it with her psychic powers... and she sensed something present there other than the people in danger.

"Is it spiritual energy weapons? Or some other device?" Koutarou pressed her. Since the factory was producing spiritual energy technology, he figured Sanae had detected something like automatons.

But Sanae shook her head. "Neither. I don't feel the same emotions I do from the haniwas. I don't feel the raw energy I do from weapons either. It's just kinda... wobbly and vague."

Sanae was perplexed. She struggled to describe what she was sensing. It was neither the clear emotions of a living thing nor the concentrated force of spiritual energy weapons. She couldn't even feel the malice of someone trying to attack. If anything, it was similar to the gray mass that the Gray Knight had summoned—but without all the power and in several places. It had to be something different entirely.

"Sanae-chan," Sanae-san called. "Let's show everyone."

"How?"

"Like this!"

Sanae-san offered a solution by projecting next to Sanae-chan and focusing on her forehead. When she did, their sword crests began glowing purple. Their connection to Signaltin and Saguratin had been activated, and thanks to that, Koutarou and the others could also see what the Sanaes were looking at. Like she'd said, something mysterious was wriggling.

"What the heck?!" Koutarou shouted, instinctively sensing something was wrong.

"Could it be?!" Kiriha went pale. She alone had a terrible hunch about what the presences might be. "Clan-dono, send your probe over there!"

"On it!" Clan didn't know what she was feeling either, but she took Kiriha's sense of urgency seriously and immediately launched a probe from the Hazy Moon. Since it was built to function in space, it

would last a while even in the chemical blaze.

“Ueeegh, gross! What is that?!” Yurika wailed when she saw the footage from the probe.

Displayed on the monitor was a murky puddle. It was hard to tell what color it was in the inferno, but it was plain for all to see that there were things moving around in it. It looked like various creatures—a dog, a horse, a monkey, a cow, humans. More accurately, the flat puddle was rising up to give shape to such things. It was a disturbing sight to all who beheld it, not just Yurika.

“I knew it...” Kiriha hissed. She rarely let her emotions get the better of her, but palpable anger flashed on her face. She knew what they were looking at. Her terrible hunch had been right. “What were you thinking, Ralgwin?!”

“Kiriha-san, what are those things?” Koutarou asked.

“Byproducts of making spiritual energy capacitors or batteries,” Kiriha replied, slamming her fist into the wall. She was furious. How long had it been since she was this angry? The sight in front of her had her blood boiling. “And they’re using live animals to do it! Maybe even humans!”

“What?!” Koutarou gasped. He suddenly understood why Kiriha was so livid. The lifeless, amorphous blob had been created in the quest for spiritual energy technology.

“Positive spiritual energy is absorbed in the process of refining ore, leaving the negative... This is what you get when you don’t take care of it!” Kiriha explained.

There were two kinds of spiritual energy—the positive spiritual energy of the living, and the negative spiritual energy of the dead. Positive spiritual energy was the simplest to use, so it was more desirable in batteries and capacitors. The ores needed to make such devices stored both types of energies, however, effectively canceling each other out. In order to collect only positive energy, the negative energy had to be filtered out. It was more or less waste material.

In their manufacturing processes, the People of the Earth made sure it was disposed of properly so that it was rendered harmless. In simple terms, it was decomposed by applying pressure with heat and spiritual energy. But Ralgwin’s factory wasn’t doing that. It would have required a large disposal line, the idea of which was abandoned to save money and time. They simply threw the spiritual energy waste in with the other refuse and left it be. That was the source of the problem.

If left alone, spiritual energy batteries naturally gathered energy, albeit slowly. Having a psychic pour energy into the device or leaving it to charge at an altar built upon a confluence of natural energy sped things up considerably. The latter was why the People of the Earth

had sought room 106 in the first place, but Ikoran had no such natural confluences. The Sanaes might have been able to find something suitable to use, but with limited resources, Ralgwin had instead relied on living sacrifices to quickly gather spiritual energy. So much death had transpired on the planet now that the Sanaes hardly knew what they were perceiving.

Another byproduct of Ralgwin's terrible process was an endless supply of corpses—and there was no worse combination than negative spiritual energy and corpses. The negative energy refuse filled the bodies, turning them into undead. In a manner of speaking, the empty containers had overflowed to the point of rupture. The explosion at the factory was the direct result of a violent release of negative spiritual energy.

"You're telling me they just let negative energy sit around and create monsters?! How could they do that?!" Koutarou shouted. He couldn't understand why anyone would allow that to happen.

"We People of the Earth have taken pains to ensure the safe disposal of the negative energy in our manufacturing—but not Ralgwin. This is the cost of pursuing only power," Kiriha explained.

"So he's happy as long as he gets his weapons?!"

"If he and his men ignore safety, they can arm themselves quickly and cheaply. And they only care about getting the upper hand here. They don't care at all what happens because of it."

Ralgwin's forces had chosen speed over safety. By spending the budget for the disposal facility elsewhere, they were able to get their weapons faster. They'd made a deadly gamble—and they'd lost.

"Kiriha and the People of the Earth developed spiritual energy technology to protect their homeland! They would never spew such deadly pollution! Even the radical faction processed their waste properly! But not these people! Even though they knew they'd be discovered eventually!" Theia shouted. She was angry too. Vandarion's faction was poisoning the planet and putting people in danger for the sake of their selfish terrorism. She was offended to her core.

"This is ridiculous! Don't you understand this isn't how a ruler behaves, Ralgwin?!" Koutarou continued to fume. Now that he fully understood the horror of the situation, he slammed his fist into the wall the same way Kiriha had. Her fury was perfectly justified in his eyes. Ralgwin was desecrating Alaia's dream for Forthorthe. He was spitting in the very face of what it meant to rule the nation. It left Koutarou trembling with rage.

"Perhaps we should consider ourselves lucky they chose a desolate region..." said Clan. She shared Koutarou's sentiment, but rather than burning with rage, her fury was cold and inward. Ralgwin's behavior

wasn't all that different from hers once upon a time. She was angry—both at him and herself. That thought flew from her mind, however, when a sharp pain struck her. “Ow!”

Koutarou had flicked her square in the forehead.

“What are you doing all of a sudden, Veltlion?!” she cried.

“You were just immature. This is different.”

Seeing Clan ruefully bite her lip had calmed Koutarou down to a degree. Being too emotional stymied rationality, and he believed that Alaia's ideals had been the result of rational consideration. He wanted Clan to conduct herself accordingly.

“But...” she began.

“You can beat yourself up later! I'll be your shoulder to cry on when this is said and done! But for now, you need to focus on what's right in front of you and carry yourself like a royal! We need your power!”

“Veltlion...” Clan went wide-eyed. There was so much she regretted, but she couldn't change the past. Her self-recrimination smoldered within her, but thanks to Koutarou, the light in her eyes changed. She had a little bit of her usual sparkle back. “You're right! I'll do what I can, Veltlion!”

“Well said! That's more like my princess!”

The real problem wasn't the chemical fire; it was the mass of negative spiritual energy. It was impossible to say what damage it would cause, much less what damage it already had. They needed to deal with it posthaste.

Technical Issues

Thursday, September 29th

Koutarou and the girls had no way of knowing if Ralgwin had really used human sacrifices on top of animal ones to gather spiritual energy. Since the weapons produced were meant to be used by people, human sacrifices were more effective. But if people had gone missing, it would've endangered their operation's cover. Forthorthian criminal investigations were more advanced than Earth's, so that was a huge risk to take for a small bump in production efficiency.

Nevertheless, they could see human figures in the puddle. It was possible their likenesses belonged to people who'd been caught up in the explosion, but one way or the other, it was clear there had been human fatalities at the facility.

"Satomi-kun, it's worse than we thought!" Maki called as she ran over to Koutarou to report what she'd just learned. She'd been analyzing the situation with Clan, Ruth, Yurika, and Sanae, and the tension in her voice and on her face told Koutarou just how bad it was.

"What's the damage?" he asked.

"That puddle's moving on its own."

"We saw that earlier."

"No, I mean... it's chasing after people."

The puddle in question—the negative energy waste—was behaving like a monster. It was attacking people with the predatory behavior of an amoeba.

"Does it have a will of its own? Or is it just instinct?" Koutarou asked. "No, more importantly... what happens when it catches someone?"

"Anything it touches is polluted by negative spiritual energy and turns into a living corpse, except when it integrates its victims instead."

The puddle's negative spiritual energy infected whatever it touched. Normal creatures were draped in positive spiritual energy, but it was weak compared to concentrated negative energy. The puddle was strong enough to eat through that natural barrier and turn people into living corpses who lost their minds and began preying on other living creatures too. It was also swallowing people up, absorbing their power, and continuing to grow.

“And it’s impossible to get to the damn thing because of the fire... Things are only going to get worse at this rate!” Koutarou lamented.

The situation at the factory was dire. The initial explosion had been caused by a release of negative spiritual energy, but the resulting fire had ignited chemicals at the facility. The result was a tricky situation in which the chemical fire made it harder to deal with the negative energy and vice versa. The fire would eventually subside on its own, but who knew how many living corpses the puddle would create by then? The workers who’d been slow to flee the factory were falling prey one after another.

“Koutarou-sama, let us go. No one else could handle both tragedies at once,” said Harumi, her hair glowing silver.

She’d concluded that, with the powers of science, spiritual energy, and magic, they were the only ones who could right the situation. Although she appeared calm, an invisible anger burned within her. There was a stronger insistence in her words than usual, and her eyes gleamed with similar resolve. The innocent people of Forthorthe were now threatened by one man’s malice—and she wouldn’t stand for it.

“You’re right,” Koutarou agreed.

Going in had been his plan all along. He didn’t know how much he and the girls could do. There were only ten of them to cover the massive factory. The odds were against them, but they couldn’t stand by and do nothing. Every minute they hesitated, the death toll only increased.

“Okay, everyone, let’s get ready to—”

As Koutarou spoke up, Nefilforan appeared on the bridge’s holographic monitor.

“Your Excellency! We’ll rescue the workers! Please take care of the waste energy and living corpses!”

“No, Princess Nefilforan! It’s too dangerous for you!”

Koutarou was stunned by Nefilforan’s offer. He and the girls had relayed what they’d learned to her unit, so she was well aware of what she’d be walking into.

“Rest assured, Your Excellency. We have the PAF just for situations like this.”

“Oh! You *could* use that!”

Nefilforan wasn’t about to charge in without a plan. Since they were traveling undercover in merchant ships, they hadn’t been able to bring traditional heavy suits. But they were all outfitted with early military-grade PAFs, which they could use to avoid direct contact with the puddle. Their PAFs would also protect them and their oxygen tanks from the flames. It was the perfect tool for the job.

Ralgwin had known that Koutarou and company would eventually discover his stronghold. He’d accordingly readied the facility for that

inevitability... yet all those preparations were now in vain. There was widespread panic due to the fire and living corpses. No one was capable of enacting protocols and defenses. The best they could do was run for their lives.

“To think the waste would create undead with negative spiritual energy... Things have taken a strange turn,” Grevanas muttered.

While everyone was panicking, he alone remained calm. It was just a fire, after all. As a man who’d returned from the grave, this was hardly enough to unnerve him.

“I was hoping to pilfer some technology in the chaos, but perhaps I should look into this a little more...”

Grevanas had stayed behind in the factory after ordering his guide and the others to evacuate. He meant to get his hands on valuable spiritual energy tech. In addition to finished products, he could take the large crystal used in the manufacturing process—and Ralgwin would never be any the wiser after the facility burned to the ground. He was thinking ahead.

“Now then... I should compare the performance of the living corpses and get a sample of the waste.”

Inside the burning factory, Grevanas began an incantation in Ancient Forthorthian. It was one of his specialties—a spell to create zombies.

“Gather, wandering souls! Denizens of the underworld! Inhabit these vessels and trample the ground with their feet! Rise up, corpses, and form a mighty legion! Let out a war cry! Army of the Dead!”

Heeding his call, corpses began rising all around him. They were victims of the fire who’d died from burns and asphyxiation. Because they’d never come into contact with the spiritual energy waste, they were perfectly normal corpses—ideal fuel for Grevanas’s zombie-making spell. There were over a dozen of them in total. It was hardly an army, but they were more than enough to be useful to Grevanas.

“Let’s start by seeing their strength and combat abilities... You, attack the enemy before you.”

Grevanas wasted no time getting to his sick experiments. He ordered one of his magically created zombies to attack a living corpse born from the spiritual energy waste. The zombie shuffled forward with sluggish steps, and thus the undead controlled by the dead began fighting the lingering emotions of the deceased. It was madness, yet Grevanas looked like he was enjoying himself. He’d long lost his mind along with his morality.

Koutarou and the girls had experience fighting zombies conjured with magic, so when they encountered the living corpses powered by negative spiritual energy, they could immediately tell the difference.

“Be careful! These are way faster than the zombies we know!” Koutarou warned everyone.

Indeed, the living corpses were far faster than normal zombies. That was partly because the corpses were so fresh, but more than that, they were imbued with spiritual energy.

“That’s all they’ve got going for them,” Theia scoffed. “Their attacks are as simple as could be.”

“Their brains are powered up, but they’re just attacking by nature. They’re not thinking about working together,” Sanae added.

Even with their brains powered by negative spiritual energy, the living corpses were effectively mindless. They had no distinct consciousness and they acted on instinct. They were drawn to attack by their hunger. Their clouded minds also made them fearful and even more prone to violence. They were incapable of coordinating with each other, making them easy enough to deal with individually. Koutarou and the girls made their way forward, safely taking out the undead one by one as they went.

“Maki-chan, the magic-made zombies fought more as a group, didn’t they?” Yurika asked.

“Yes. They can also follow simple orders and perform uncomplicated tasks. You could say that magical zombies are smarter, while spiritual energy zombies are stronger,” Maki explained.

“Stay on your toes!” Harumi called out. “They’re not just strong—their senses are sharp too!”

“Harumi is right. They’re gathering at an impressive rate,” Clan informed the group.

“Waaah, they’re coming!” Shizuka cried. “There’s a ton of them coming from that corridor!”

“Keep calm. I shall handle them.”

“Whatever you do, Uncle, don’t you dare chew on them like you did last time!”

The living corpses couldn’t cooperate the way magically conjured zombies could, but when they converged on their targets, they appeared to move strategically together, coordinating charges, attacking in waves, et cetera. That was the result of their heightened senses—something unique to spiritual energy zombies.

“The waste tank isn’t far now, everyone! There will likely be more enemies there!” said Ruth.

“Be wary of the spiritual energy waste in particular. You won’t come out of an encounter with it unscathed,” added Kiriha.

The group had left the rescue operation to Nefilforan and her unit while they advanced toward the waste tank. That was where the living corpses were coming from, and it was continuously producing more. Koutarou and the girls wanted to clean up the monstrous

puddle of waste there before it could break out and cause even more chaos.

“Where next, Ruth-san?” Koutarou asked.

“Please head through the gate to your right, Master!” she responded. “Cutting through the room with the blast furnaces there will be the quickest way there!”

“Got it!”

Koutarou and the girls (including all three Sanaes) numbered twelve, but only ten of them had entered the factory. Clan and Ruth remained on the Hazy Moon as backup. Normally Kiriha would have stayed behind as well, but she was with Koutarou and the others this time. Since spiritual energy technology was involved, it was more beneficial for her and the haniwas to stick with the group.

“Bad news, Satomi-kun!” Shizuka shouted. “The hallway is covered in flames! I’ll be fine with Uncle’s power, but getting through here will be impossible for everyone else!”

“Clan, do something!” Koutarou shouted in turn.

“I am! Okay, okay, okay... Everybody, hold your breath for a moment while I activate the building’s active fire protection!”

Via a drone she’d sent in with the group, Clan hacked into the local system to turn on the fire suppression. It was enough to put out most of the flames in their way. Magic would be enough to protect them from what remained.

Koutarou and the girls thus continued to make their way forward through enemies and obstacles alike. The disaster afoot spared them combat with Ralgwin’s forces, however, so it wasn’t *all* bad. Nefilforan and her unit were a massive boon as well. With them handling the rescue operation, the Corona House crew was free to focus on disposing of the spiritual energy waste.

“How are things going for Nefi?” Theia asked Ruth over the comms.

“They appear to have encountered living corpses as well, but she and her men are doing fine against them,” she responded.

“So they’re already getting the hang of their PAFs, huh? I guess I should’ve expected that from the unit who ordered them before anyone else...”

Nefilforan’s unit was currently putting out fires, finding survivors, and fending off living corpses—all with the help of PAFs.

In addition to its standard functions, the military-grade PAF was also equipped with an oxygen tank. That made the device a little larger, but it was still far more portable than a traditional power-assisted suit. The oxygen tank activated as soon as the PAF was deployed, allowing Nefilforan and her unit to get to work straight

away.

“Captain, we’ve received word that Lashanta’s squad has engaged the living corpses,” said Nana, reporting the latest to Nefilforan.

Nefilforan was currently in a camp set up outside of the factory. She’d wanted to go in with her unit, but her soldiers had vehemently objected. They hadn’t yet known if the PAF would be useful in live combat, and the unit wasn’t willing to risk their commander in a burning building. In the end, Nefilforan had relented. She understood that her men worrying for her personal safety in such a dangerous situation would only make things riskier. And so she’d stayed back—although she wasn’t happy about it. She was administering orders to each squad based on the reports from her vice captain, Nana.

“How’s the battle going?” Nefilforan asked.

“The first wave of undead was eliminated without problem, but one soldier was hit in the second wave that was attracted by the commotion,” Nana informed her faithfully.

“How bad is it?!” Nefilforan went pale when she heard the news. She knew how the living corpses worked thanks to the intel she’d gotten from Koutarou and the girls. She knew they were capable of infecting their victims with their negative energy.

“The medical check presented no cause for concern. It seems the PAF completely prevented any infection. The rest of the wave was dispatched without issue.”

“I’m glad,” said Nefilforan, letting out a sigh of relief.

This was the first real test of whether the PAF would protect the soldiers. They knew it shielded them from fire, but living corpses and negative spiritual energy were another matter altogether. Knowing her troops would be safe from those too, Nefilforan felt a weight lifted off of her shoulders.

“Vice Captain, ready cleaning equipment for chemical weapons just in case,” she ordered. “We’ll need it later.”

“Right away,” replied Nana.

“How is the rescue operation going?” Nefilforan asked next.

“It’s proceeding smoothly. So far, 582 people have been rescued.”

“Most of them are from the central and western areas, I see... Progress in the east is slower,” Nefilforan observed.

“Clearing the rubble is taking a while,” Nana explained.

“Hmm... Have some of the soldiers head east when they return from their evacuation runs. The exact number is up to you. Once the rubble is out of the way, they can return to their original missions.”

“Understood. I’ll make the arrangements.”

Nefilforan’s instructions were swift and precise, no doubt because she was less worried now. She had faith in the PAF, but deep down, she’d been nervous about how it would perform in combat conditions.

“I’m glad you ordered PAFs straight away, Captain,” Nana said with a bright expression. She was just as relieved as Nefilforan. No commander wanted to see their troops exposed to unknown danger.

“Likewise. I don’t want to imagine how this situation would be playing out without them. It’s a good thing you have connections with His Excellency,” Nefilforan responded.

“It was all thanks to your quick decision-making.”

The PAF thankfully protected the troops from the intense heat of the chemical fire, provided clean oxygen to breathe, and prevented contact with the spiritual energy waste. It also enhanced their strength to fight and clear rubble. The devices could also easily be shared with anyone who needed to be rescued for extra protection. Without PAFs, there would have been deadly delays in the rescue operation. Nefilforan’s quick decision to adopt it was already paying off.

“I suppose we have all of them to thank too, especially His Excellency the Blue Knight,” continued Nana.

“Indeed. We wouldn’t have been here at the right time if things hadn’t fallen into place the way they had. Here’s to our luck—and to our friends,” agreed Nefilforan.

“You’re right... Oh, it seems Ikoran’s air force is dropping fire suppressants.”

“Tell the troops to stand down temporarily.”

“Right away!”

With the assistance of their PAFs, Nefilforan’s unit was well on their way to completing their mission. The fires were steadily growing weaker, and the rescue operation was going off without a hitch. The only remaining disaster was the spiritual energy waste deep in the factory. The real determiner of their success would be whether Koutarou and the girls could dispose of it. Little did they know there was someone in the stronghold who would make that as hard as possible for them...

Grevanas’s initial goal had only been to learn more about the living corpses. He now had a firm grasp of their properties—their physical strength, their potential military use, their reproduction, and their compatibility with magic. His experiments had yielded rather detailed intelligence.

“Hmm, so undead are weakened by contact with the waste...” he muttered.

A body was lying on the floor before him, writhing awkwardly. It was both a living corpse and a zombie. Grevanas had intentionally ordered one of his zombies to interact with the waste, which flooded its body with negative spiritual energy and made it difficult for the zombie to move properly.

“I see... It’s struggling, confused by two conflicting orders. But this, too, has its uses. How interesting!” Grevanas declared excitedly.

The lich was controlling the zombie via his magic, but his orders were now fighting the negative spiritual energy in the zombie for dominance. It left the corpse helpless, unable to function properly as either a minion or an independent entity. This new discovery thrilled Grevanas.

“This interaction between magic and spiritual energy needs to be explored carefully... I couldn’t stand it if this were to happen to Maxfern-sama.”

Grevanas’s dream was to bring back his late lord. Maxfern, however, had been dead for over two thousand years. Resurrecting him wouldn’t be easy. Grevanas believed he’d need the assistance of spiritual energy tech, but the struggling zombie on the floor in front of him told him pulling it off would be more than a simple matter of combining spiritual energy and magic. He needed an intermediary to safely use them together.

“For now... this is all I can do.”

Grevanas released the spell he’d cast. When he did, the corpse on the floor stopped writhing and sprang up with great agility. No longer under the influence of Grevanas’s magic, it was now a living corpse controlled only by negative spiritual energy.

“Now...”

Grevanas swung his arm, and the nails and teeth of the living corpse began glowing red. Using the mana dispersed from his zombification spell, he’d cast another to enhance the newborn living corpse.

“The potential is brilliant, so it’s a shame I’m reduced to something so petty.”

Trying to control the corpse with both magic and spiritual energy at the same time disabled it, so Grevanas had decided to relinquish control in favor of using his magic to strengthen the creature—specifically its means of attack. It was the best synthesis of magic and spiritual energy he could think of under the circumstances.

“Go forth. You have plenty of prey awaiting you ahead.”

Grevanas then created illusions of people screaming and running away. They were simple holograms enhanced with sound and smell, enough to provoke the living corpse. And just as Grevanas hoped, his enchanted undead began chasing after them.

“What will you do now, Blue Knight? This isn’t what I’d had in mind, but it’s not so bad...”

As Grevanas watched his new army of combat corpses leave, he disappeared into the crimson flames and pitchy shadows. There was still more he wanted to test. More he needed to do. He didn’t have

time to wait and see what happened here.

Koutarou used Saguratin to attack the living corpses. The positive and negative energies clashed, canceling each other out at first. But Saguratin was overflowing with an abundance of positive spiritual energy, which surged forth after the initial clash—right into the living corpse, returning it to a normal one.

“There’s so many of them! We’ll never get through them if we deal with them all one at a time!” Koutarou cried.

A single living corpse didn’t pose much of a threat to him or any of the girls. They were now galactic heroes with plenty of battles under their belts, after all. The only real advantage the corpses had was their number. Koutarou had already taken out dozens of them, but they just kept coming. The spiritual energy waste was generating more of them by the minute, and they were showing up faster than Koutarou and the girls could stop them. At this rate, they’d eventually be surrounded.

“But if we use any powerful attacks, it could bring down the entire factory! We’d lose any remaining survivors!” Theia objected.

Resorting to missiles or explosives to clear out the undead horde was a sound tactical decision—or it would have been if not for the unstable building. If the factory collapsed, it would doom the ongoing rescue operation. That meant Koutarou and the girls would have to stick to defeating the living corpses the old-fashioned way—with elbow grease and teamwork. It would be slow going.

“Wait, I know!” Koutarou suddenly exclaimed. “What about Yurika’s poison gas?!”

“I can’t say it *wouldn’t* work, but...” Yurika faltered.

The living corpses were powered by negative spiritual energy, but they were still reliant on their physical bodies to move. That meant chemical agents would indeed be effective against them, but such a play was off the table.

“Satomi-kun, we can’t risk any survivors breathing in the poison,” Maki cut in.

Carelessly using a gas attack could jeopardize anyone still in the factory. Poison gas would kill them, and sleeping gas would leave them vulnerable to the fire. Yurika’s signature magic was too risky when friend and foe were intermixed on the battlefield.

“Damn... You’re right,” Koutarou muttered.

Time was running out fast. The spiritual energy waste had a finite number of victims to convert into living corpses, but there didn’t need to be a limitless number of them. There only had to be enough to overwhelm Koutarou and the girls, whose stamina was limited. All they could do now was suppress their impatience to rush ahead while

hoping they'd outlast their undead foes.

But they were staring down another problem. The first to realize it was Harumi.

"Satomi-kun, something's been bothering me," she spoke up.

"What is it?" Koutarou asked.

"I don't think the corpses are only coming after us. What if they're heading into town too...?"

The factory was located on the outskirts of town, but it wasn't too far from civilization. There were neighborhoods nearby for the factory workers, and there was a convenient commercial district just a short drive away. Harumi feared the undead would make their way there if Koutarou and the girls took too long.

"I see! Ruth-san!"

"I'm on it, Master!"

The Hazy Moon on standby overhead had been monitoring vehicles leaving the factory and mine to catch any enemy troops attempting to flee the scene with weapons or technology. But with so many people trying to escape the fire, it hadn't been realistic to monitor individuals too. That is, until now when they had good reason. Ruth quickly adjusted her cameras and sensors to detect people moving away from the factory.

"Master, this is terrible!" she reported, pale in the face. The initial reports confirmed Harumi's worst fears. "A group of living corpses is headed for the urban area!"

"And with great speed!" Clan added. "They're running abnormally fast!"

Living corpses were undead, so they wouldn't run out of breath from running nonstop. They could go full tilt without breaks, and it appeared that the corpses outside of the factory were moving even faster than the ones Koutarou and the girls had been fighting. They were closing in on the town with frightening speed. No one knew why they were running past the evacuees outside to head for civilization, but there was no time to contemplate the matter. If Koutarou and the girls didn't stop them, they would flood the town and turn the factory disaster into a city-wide catastrophe.

"Satomi-kun, we have to do something!" Harumi pleaded. She was just as pale as Ruth. Her terrible hunch told her the worst had yet to come, leaving her on the verge of panic.

"Ruth-san, send all of your drones!" Koutarou shouted.

"But that would leave you without backup!" Ruth argued.

"It'll be a living nightmare if the corpses make it to town! Hurry!"

"Understood!"

Advanced spatial distortion technology had made teleportation a reality, but making it safe for human use required extra precautions

and preparations. Machines, however, were a different story—and that included Ruth’s drones. Koutarou wanted her to warp all of them at once to intercept the horde of undead, but it was a risky move. Ruth’s unmanned fighters were currently supporting Koutarou and the other girls. They provided combat assistance, as well as relay points for hacking and other critical functions. Losing the drones would effectively mean severing their connection to Ruth’s and Clan’s backup.

“Damn it! Was this a trap?” Koutarou shouted in anger. He’d made his decision aware of the danger, but he felt like he was dancing in the palm of the enemy’s hand. It was beyond frustrating—especially with so many lives on the line.

“No,” said Kiriha. “A ploy of this scale would’ve been impossible. Nevertheless, it’s obvious that someone here is pulling the strings.”

There was no doubt in Kiriha’s mind that the situation at the stronghold had begun with an accident, but someone had since taken advantage of that. There was no way the living corpses had decided to charge the town all on their own. They normally attacked on sight, yet they’d run right past the soldiers and workers outside of the factory.

“You think one of Ralgwin’s men is doing this?” Koutarou asked.

“Based on how fast the living corpses are moving, I think it’s Grevanas. He must have used magic to enhance their movement speed.”

Kiriha suspected the grand wizard was the one maneuvering in the shadows. He had access to powerful magic that would allow him to both strengthen the undead and guide them toward town. That would be child’s play for him.

“Magic makes it easy to turn a situation in your favor... What a terrible thing for a villain to have!” Theia said with a grimace.

As a princess who aspired to be a good ruler, the idea of twisting a tragedy like the factory fire for personal benefit disgusted her. Elfaria, too, knew how to use a situation to her advantage, but Theia drew a clear distinction between her mother and Grevanas. Elfaria never acted in such a way selfishly. It was always for the people’s benefit.

“I don’t like it either,” said Kiriha. “But you can’t make an omelet without breaking a few eggs. We’ll have to follow his lead this time.”

The situation was dire. They’d need a bold play to turn things around. And Kiriha was willing to borrow one directly from Grevanas’s book.

“What are you thinking?” Koutarou asked.

“Change of plans,” she replied. “We’re going straight for the command room.”

They’d been headed to the waste tank in order to cut the problem off at its source. But without the drones’ support, it would be

dangerous to proceed. The way there was packed with undead. So Kiriha had plotted out a change of course in hopes of improving their prospects.

As Kiriha postulated, Grevanas was responsible for the living corpses that had left the factory for town. He'd enhanced them with magic and guided them using illusions with two goals in mind. The first was to spread the confusion in the city, allowing Ralgwin's forces to escape. The other was to distract Koutarou and his crew, hopefully dividing them. While splitting them up would be ideal, even splitting their attention would hinder them.

"Hmm... So they sent their machines. The way the Blue Knight prioritizes human life is predictable—an obvious weakness." Grevanas observed his undead racing toward the city via the magic of far-sight. It hadn't taken too long for drones to descend on the horde. "I suppose this will suffice for now. It's not a bad result under the circumstances."

Luring the unmanned fighters away from Koutarou *did* split their forces, if only slightly. Grevanas hadn't hoped for much, however, so even this result pleased him. All that remained was to take advantage of the confusion and escape. Grevanas hoped Ralgwin's troops would be able to flee the scene with ease—just like he was about to with the technology he'd grabbed.

"...Oh? What's this the Blue Knight and his friends have called in?"

Grevanas was prepared to make a quick exit from the factory when he noticed what Koutarou and the girls were doing. He was observing them too with the power of his far-sight.

"I could just leave them be, but... Hmm, I suppose I should play a card just in case."

Grevanas saw no harm in simply leaving now that he had what he wanted. Yet since he had the mana and time to spare, he also saw no harm in taking a few countermeasures. It was a smart call.

But what Koutarou and the girls had just called in would exceed his wildest imaginings.

Once Koutarou and the team on the ground decided to head for the command room, Ruth made her move too. She leaped up out of the Hazy Moon's operator's seat and made for the bridge exit.

"I leave the rest to you, Clan-sama!" she cried.

"Right! Good luck!" Clan replied as she watched her go. *Heh, she looks like she's about to go out on a date...*

Ruth was practically skipping as she left. There was a bright smile on her face too. She understood the gravity of the situation, but she couldn't hold back the joy welling up inside her as she entered the

elevator.

“To the hangar!” she instructed her AI. Even her voice was cheerful.

“As you wish, my lady.”

Ruth had been waiting for this—although she’d felt bad since it meant hoping for a fight. Nevertheless, the fact that her time had now arrived meant the world to her. She pushed her way through the opening elevator doors and gave the AI further instructions.

“Bring out Warlord! Equip the Yellow Line backpack!”

“As you wish, my lady.”

The steel form, stored horizontally in the corner of the hangar to keep it out of the way, now slid over to Ruth. The frame it was affixed to lifted it upright in front of her. A blue giant over five meters tall looked down at Ruth.

“Beginning backpack exchange,” her bracelet informed her.

“Open the cockpit!” she commanded.

The giant, Warlord III-Revised, opened its front armor to reveal its cockpit. There were now two seats inside, which crowded the cockpit. Two grown men would have struggled to cram in, although Koutarou and a girl would be able to fit snugly.

“Backpack exchange complete. Yellow Line is equipped.”

“Activate land warfare mode! Omit any unnecessary system checks!”

“As you wish, my lady. Bypassing checks on space equipment and related systems. Ten seconds until activation.”

Multicolored lights from the monitors and various indicators illuminated Ruth’s face. Her eyes tracked the information scrolling by. The checks returned no errors. She knew they wouldn’t. She’d prepared perfectly for this exact moment.

“Activating Warlord III-Revised in land warfare mode with default anti-mobile weaponry.”

“I’m ready to go, Clan-sama!”

The second the activation process completed, the locks on the frame holding the suit of armor released. Warlord then proceeded toward the hangar exit. It would use the Hazy Moon’s launch system to take off. The stronghold was some distance away, but with an assisted launch and thrusters, Warlord would be there in no time flat.

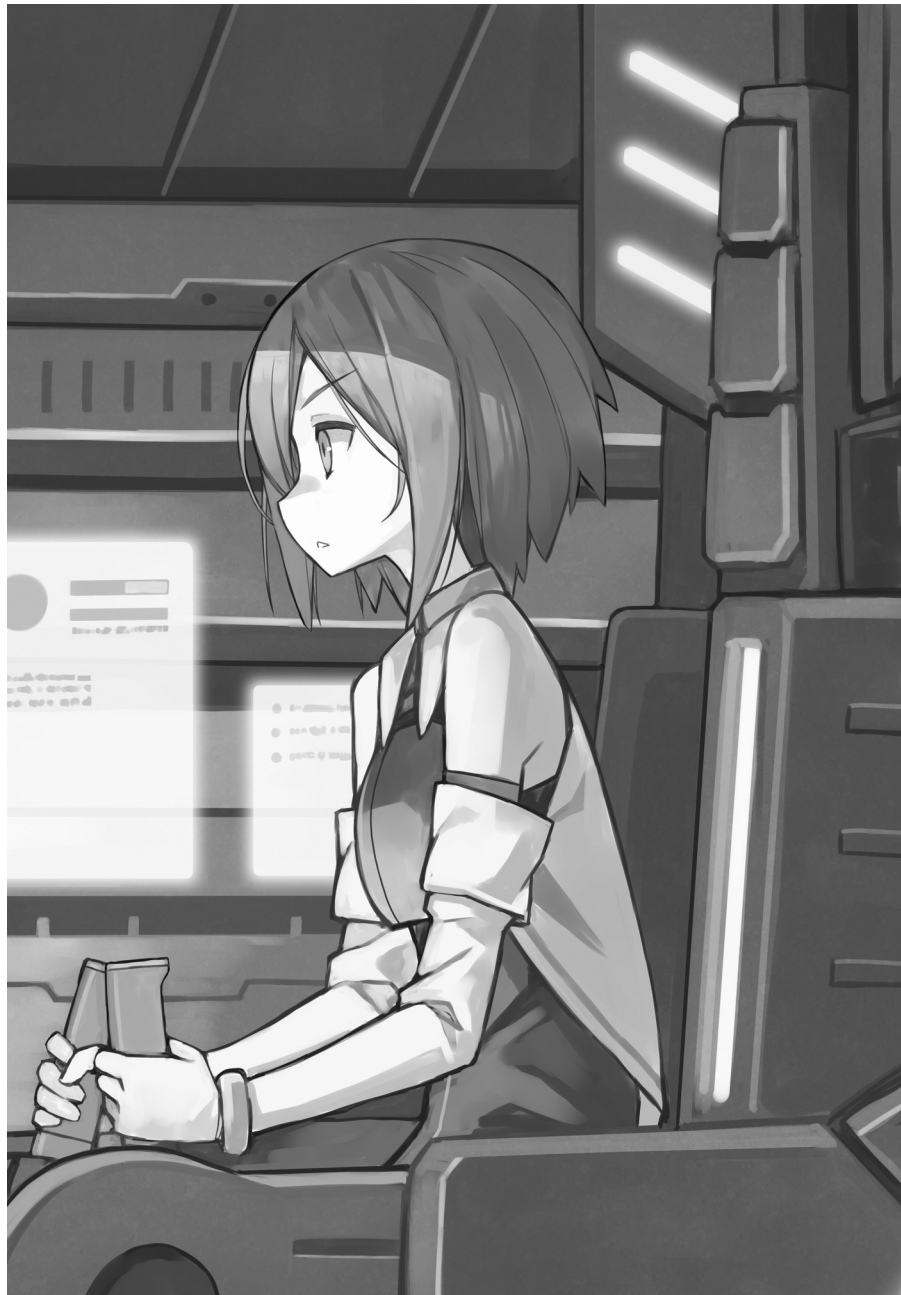
“Good luck, Pardomshiha. I’ll be praying for your fortune.”

Warlord mounted the launch system. Once its legs snapped into place, Clan disabled the safety.

“Thank you! Ruthkania Nye Pardomshiha in Warlord III-Rev Yellow Line... taking off!”

Ruth’s eyes were practically sparkling. She’d fought from the back line for so long because her information processing prowess was

conducive to a supporting role... yet she'd never been fully satisfied with that relegation. She belonged to the proud and storied Pardomshiha family. She, too, was a knight of Forthorthe, and she longed to fight by Koutarou's side. She couldn't stomach being the only one to fight from safety while her beloved took all the risk on the front line. She wanted to be with him, just like Theia, Nefilforan, and Shizuka. And if worse came to worst, she wanted to share his fate. The discrepancy between her talents and her heart's desire tortured her.



Warlord rocketed out of the Hazy Moon with a loud whoosh. The machine had been modified to hold two pilots, but it had also received an upgrade to its gear—an interchangeable backpack system. This allowed Warlord to be outfitted for different situations, and it was currently wearing its Yellow Line loadout, which lived up to its name. It enhanced comms, sensors, and processors. It was perfect for Ruth, but she didn't think of it as equipment to help her out.

"I'm on my way, Master!"

Ruth saw Yellow Line as a tool for her to defend the other girls and, most importantly, Koutarou.

The factory was designed to accommodate the coming and going of large transport vehicles, so the five-meter Warlord had no trouble getting inside. Ruth was more cramped in the cockpit than Warlord was in the base.

"Veltlion, do you know where the command room is and how to get there?" Clan asked over the comms.

"Yeah, I do," Koutarou replied. "But I dunno if we're gonna fit."

"Let's try this way, Master," said Ruth from beside him. Her face was practically next to his. They were so close that they could kiss if either of them leaned in just a little.

"Yeah, okay. Thanks, Ruth-san."

"You're welcome."

There was barely any room inside Warlord. Its two riders could barely move, so Koutarou was piloting the machine with the automatic controls that read his thoughts. It was identical to the way he controlled Blue Knight or a PAF, so it was easy enough for him. He was mostly worried about Ruth, who was stuck in the cramped cockpit with him.

"I'm dispatching small drones to keep a lookout," she informed him.

"This thing is big with plenty of blind spots, so it'd help if you could keep an eye out too," Koutarou told his AI.

"As you wish, my lord!"

Koutarou didn't understand why, but he'd noticed that Ruth was unusually energetic. Her voice and expression were bright. She didn't seem to care about being stuffed in the cockpit at all.

"Ruth's sure fired up," Sanae remarked from outside of Warlord. She could sense Ruth's excitement even through the machine's thick armor.

"This is what she's been dreaming of, after all," said Theia. She couldn't sense Ruth's aura like Sanae could, but she knew her best friend well. She didn't have to see her to know how excited she was

right now.

“What do you mean?” Sanae asked.

“Aside from ship battles, Ruth is usually stuck supporting us from the rear. Especially on missions like this where our vanguard is so strong. But with two seats in Warlord now, she can finally be on the front line with Koutarou.”

“Ah, that explains it.”

Ruth, who’d been watching her friends fight from afar for so long, was finally by Koutarou’s side. They would live or die together in this battle—not that she had any intention of letting Koutarou fall. She wanted to help him seize victory with her skills. That gave her drive and purpose. She was more pumped than ever. Sanae could understand that much. It wasn’t dissimilar from what Sanae-san had felt upon clearing up her long-held worry.

“I know what it’s like to wait to be with someone,” Kiriha said thoughtfully.

“Indeed, we should support Ruth-san this time,” Harumi agreed.

They, too, understood how Ruth felt, and they were happy to see her wish fulfilled. The other girls naturally felt the same way. They all happily followed behind Warlord, using its massive frame and heavy armor as cover as they advanced.

“Hey, Maki-chan, something’s coming out of its back,” Yurika remarked.

“They look like small unmanned fighters,” Maki replied. “I guess their unique design is because they’re Ruth-san’s signature equipment.”

Indeed, Warlord’s backpack opened in front of the girls to launch several unmanned fighters. Warlord normally carried the Motor Knights, but these smaller crafts were of a distinctly different build. They were Ruth’s signature drones, designed to have more than just combat functions. That meant they weren’t as powerful as the Motor Knights, but they were superior when it came to gathering intel and their power supplies lasted much longer.

The girls were all wondering what the drones would do. And to everyone’s surprise, they immediately opened fire.

“What in the world?! They just started shooting!” Shizuka shouted. She was the closest to the drones and leaped back in surprise.

“Ruth means to keep the enemy away from Koutarou at all costs. Heh, she must *really* be frustrated,” Theia mused with a smirk. She saw right through her best friend.

Ruth was trying to push back any and all threats to her beloved. Every foe that entered her range was instantly gunned down. She wasn’t even giving the enemy a chance to get to Koutarou. She was intent on defending him—and she was doing so rather aggressively.

She showed no hesitation in taking out her enemies, although it helped that they were living corpses.

The living corpses were drawn to Warlord and the sound of its thunderous footfalls, and Ruth's fighters dutifully shot them down as they approached. This formation allowed them to make smooth and steady progress through the stronghold.

"Clan, what should we do when we get to the command room?" Koutarou asked.

"You don't have to do anything," Clan responded.

"Huh? Then why are we going there?"

"We need you to get Warlord to the command room, Master," Ruth explained.

"I'll then use it as a relay point to hack into the mainframe," Clan followed up.

In order to carry out Kiriha's plan, they needed to reach the heart of the stronghold. The facility's network had been fragmented by the explosion, preventing them from accessing the mainframe via any other terminals. They needed to make it directly to the command room to hack in.

"Oh yeah, I guess I did send away the drones you'd normally use for that," said Koutarou.

"It was the natural division of resources since we couldn't teleport Warlord," replied Clan.

It was only safe to teleport unmanned crafts swiftly, as they could forgo most safety protocols. They could always be rebuilt if something went awry, after all. Ruth aboard Warlord was a different story. So it made the most sense to send the fighters to town while she sortied to Koutarou and company's location.

"It's a little bit bulky and awkward, but it's sturdy and powerful, so it's perfect for this mission," Koutarou remarked.

"And now I have an opportunity to contribute to the fight," Ruth added.

"But you're always contributing, Ruth-san."

"Only indirectly. Not like a knight should."

"Ah, so your family pride is on the line."

"Heh, something like that. Oh, Clan-sama, we are almost there."

Warlord III-Revised stood five meters tall, so the group needed to find a tall and wide hallway to get to the command room. Fortunately, there was one that led exactly where they needed to go. And Warlord's heavy firepower made clearing the way there easy.

"Find an access point to connect to," Clan ordered.

"Right away!" Ruth replied.

"I'll leave that to you while I take care of things elsewhere."

"As you wish, my princess!"

The command room wasn't far now. Clan would need to hack into the mainframe once the group reached it, but for now, she had bigger fish to fry. She was one busy princess.

Clan had teleported ten unmanned fighters from the Hazy Moon. It was nearly the ship's entire force, but there was no guarantee it would be enough against the growing army of living corpses. There had only been ten at first, but their ranks increased as they approached the city. There were now several dozen and their numbers were only increasing as they attacked people and even animals along the way. Rats, wild dogs, and reptiles endemic to Ikoran had joined the horde. There weren't too many just yet, but at this rate, they would hit a hundred or more in the blink of an eye. And once they reached the city, it'd be all over.

"Not on my watch!" Clan cried.

She knew she needed to prevent the horde from breaching the urban area, but ten drones wasn't much to work with. They had considerable firepower, but there simply weren't enough of them to track down and dispatch all of the living corpses. Attempting to do so would cast a net so wide that many would slip through.

"How vexing! To think I'd wind up fighting back another outbreak!"

Clan couldn't hide her frustration. The worst part was that Ralgwin's tactics were disturbingly similar to Maxfern's. It had been a virus with no cure two thousand years ago, and now it was a zombified army. She suspected Grevanas had had a hand in both plans, and she hated that he was so quick to prey on innocent people. It reminded her of her old self.

You'd better lend me your ear later, Veltlion...

All that bolstered her were Koutarou's words. Clan was angry, but she knew what she needed to do. She put her past behind her and focused on the fight ahead. Fortunately, it was going well so far.

"I can't use all of the drones to attack... I need some of them on the search."

She had ten unmanned crafts at her disposal. Focusing too much on offense would leave too many blind spots. Too few drones attacking meant it would take too long to stop the horde, however, so she had to strike a careful balance and divide her resources wisely.

"Okay, go!"

In the end, Clan ordered seven drones to attack and three to carry out the search. The attackers gunned down any discovered living corpses, and the searchers kept watch over the area. Clan had no way of knowing if she'd made the right choice, but she had no time to worry over it either. She simply had to go with it.

“Ah, you little...!”

Living corpses moved by the power of the negative spiritual energy that shrouded their bodies. It made them faster than most people, and when they sensed danger, they fled on instinct. Clan was having a hard time hitting them. But that wasn't the worst part.

“Even when I hit them, they don't go down!”

Since the living corpses were undead, certain weapons like laser cannons were less effective on them. They could keep going even with gaping holes in their chests, and the light-based attack made no impact to slow them. A shot to the head or legs would still stop them in their tracks, but those were tricky targets at the speeds the corpses were running. And though Clan didn't know it yet, the living corpses she was up against had been enhanced by magic to make them even tougher.

On the other hand, projectile weapons were proving more effective than normal. They lacked the raw power of lasers, but the physical force of their hits still did the trick. Repeated blows were especially effective, particularly as most of the living corpses weren't wearing armor. Explosives were just as effective for the same reason. As physical weapons, however, they were restricted by ammunition—a drawback lasers didn't share. Clan wasn't sure she had enough rounds to take out all the corpses.

“There's more of them than I thought... This is bad.”

Clan's three unmanned crafts searching out targets were continuing to find more and more living corpses. For every one defeated, another showed up. She was making it nowhere, leaving her with a sinking feeling that a few would manage to slip past her and into the city. But before that could happen...

“Clan-sama, we've found an access point!” Ruth called over the comms.

“Finally!” That was the report Clan had been waiting for. If all went well, her situation could turn around. Hope brightened her face. “Please let this work!”

Clan was practically praying as she typed away at her computer. Hacking into the stronghold's mainframe was now a race against the clock. Once she was in, she would still need time to work her magic. And she had to make it happen before the living corpses closed in on the city.

“Oh, Goddess of Dawn... please...”

Clan wasn't particularly pious. She believed in science, which wasn't compatible with faith. But at the same time, she believed it was the goddess who'd brought her and Koutarou together. She had no other way to explain such a fateful meeting. She couldn't imagine finding anyone she loved more. So she prayed to the goddess. If

Koutarou was her destiny, she wanted to believe everything would work out. And she intended to give him an earful later.

“Access granted to the mainframe of Ikoran’s third factory,” the computer said. “Welcome, Your Excellency Ralgwin.”

“I-I did it!” Clan cheered. She was in. The system thought she was Ralgwin, giving her full control of the stronghold. “And now for this!”

Clan now had administrator access to the entire facility, but she’d yet to clear the final hurdle. This was the part she’d prayed hardest for. She swiftly input the necessary commands manually, which was faster than doing it vocally for her. Her fingers danced across the keyboard.

“I’m counting on you here, Ralgwin!”

Finally, she pressed the enter key, executing a plethora of commands with three primary goals: to reconfigure the classification of hostile forces, reboot the communications network, and reactivate the base’s defense systems.

“I hope you’re a careful and competent commander!”

The stronghold’s system identified any Imperial Army forces as enemies, and Clan had changed its settings to target living corpses instead. Because of their low body temperature, they were easy to differentiate from normal people. She’d also patched the fragmented network, rerouting broken lines and enabling wireless connections where that didn’t work. The base generally refrained from wireless for security reasons, but there was equipment for it in place to use when necessary. Then, last but not least, Clan had reactivated the stronghold’s defenses that were disabled during the explosion. Any base had a system for intercepting enemies, and Clan was betting everything that Ralgwin had set up a good one.

“Veltlion, a large number of mobile weapons are mobilizing!” she excitedly reported.

“Great job! What about the town?” Koutarou asked.

“The gamble paid off! Like Kii thought, Ralgwin prepared an ambush for us!”

Ralgwin had specifically prepared to take out human invaders—Koutarou and company. Clan had hacked into the mainframe hoping to reroute those defenses and turn them against the living corpses. Just like Grevanas, they were working with what they had to turn the situation to their advantage. Nevertheless, it had been a risk. They hadn’t known the size or scale of the defenses Ralgwin had set up.

Kiriha had anticipated they would be enough. This base was critical to Ralgwin’s operation, after all, and she believed he would have readied himself for the arrival of the Imperial Army. Moreover, Ralgwin was short on manpower, so she’d suspected that he would rely on mobile weapons. But the reality of the situation could have

been much uglier. If Ralgwinn were any less of a commander, his defenses could have been quite sorry indeed. But thankfully, the gamble Koutarou and the girls had taken paid off. His stronghold was well guarded with mobile weapons, and they were stationed in the city to pincer any invaders attacking the base.

Once Kiriha heard the report from Clan, she was so relieved that she almost slumped over on the spot. Never before had she resorted to hoping her enemy was an excellent and exacting leader.

Getting the mobile weapons up and moving was Clan's job, and after that, it was showtime for another member of the group—Ruth. She glanced at the data extracted from the computer in the command room and reorganized the mobile weapons into new formations based on the information gathered by the surveillance equipment. Naturally, she turned them on the living corpses approaching the city. The mobile weapons had been planted to ambush Koutarou and company, yet now the machines were working for them. Between the mobile weapons and the Hazy Moon's fighters, they were now effectively keeping the corpses at bay.

"I knew we'd be fine as soon as Ruth-san stepped in," Nana exclaimed. Koutarou had contacted Nefilforan's unit in advance and asked them not to harm Ralgwinn's mobile weapons, as they would be key in defeating the corpses. Seeing it come to pass, Nana couldn't contain her excitement.

"She certainly made me work for this," Clan remarked on Ruth's involvement.

"I am very sorry about that, Your Highness," Nana apologized.

At a joint training session, Nana had once said that Koutarou would be invincible with Ruth by his side in Warlord III-Revised. That was what had inspired Ruth to plead for the construction of the Yellow Line backpack. It was an immense amount of work for Clan, but Nana had been right. With Ruth in it, Warlord was eliminating the living corpses in the factory at an astounding speed as well as looking for survivors.

No one could match Ruth's speed and precision—not even with magic. In that sense, she was like a wizard of technology.

"I hardly need to be here," Koutarou joked with a dry smile.

"That's not true in the slightest, Master. Please look at this."

But there were problems not even Ruth could solve, and she'd just discovered one such problem.

"Is that... a tiger?" Koutarou asked warily.

"A living corpse made from one," Ruth explained. "For some unknown reason, laser attacks don't work on it."

Ruth had indicated a beast that looked much like tigers on Earth,

but it stood three meters tall and was over five meters long. Its body temperature and behavior indicated it was a living corpse, yet laser bombardments did nothing to it. It was odd. Either the animal was neutralizing the attacks or they were all missing somehow. Ruth couldn't tell which.

Fortunately, the two magicians in the group recognized the threat.

"Satomi-san, that's a magical creature from Folsaria!" Yurika shouted.

"It's a blink beast!" Maki added. "It's a troublesome foe capable of conjuring illusions to conceal its location and using short-range teleportation!"

Magical creatures fell mainly into two categories: beings summoned from other worlds, like angels and demons, and animals that had developed under the influence of mana. This feline beast was the latter. It had grown up in the mana-rich lands of Folsaria, so it could use magic instinctively much the same way Alunaya and Shizuka could. And it used that magic to conceal itself and fake out targets with illusions. They weren't hitting its real body at all. All in all, the blink beast was a dangerous hunter that was next to impossible to stop.

"Is this Grevanas's doing too?!" Koutarou gasped.

There was no way a magical creature from Folsaria had made it to Ikoran coincidentally. Someone had to have unleashed it, and the most likely culprit was Grevanas. He'd likely brought it to the factory and exposed it to the spiritual energy waste to transform it into a living corpse, and his motivations for doing so were obvious. He wanted to cause further chaos and buy time for Ralgwin's men to escape.

"Ruth-san, where is it right now?!" Koutarou asked.

"It's close to the waste tank! But it is moving toward people!"

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire! We need to chase it down!"

If the beast was headed toward people, that meant it was headed outside where the rescue workers and evacuees were gathered. If it reached them, there would be a massacre. And even if it didn't, it would make quick work of any survivors it crossed paths with in the factory. Koutarou couldn't just let it run amok.

"Veltlion, I could use some backup here too!" Clan called over the comms. "There are some corpses in the horde that the unmanned crafts can't handle!"

"You've really done it now, Grevanas!" Koutarou shouted angrily.

Grevanas had specifically set his corpses loose in such a fashion that they were now forcing Koutarou and the girls to split up. Someone would have to head toward the city to defend the urban

area.

Yurika could teleport, making her the perfect candidate to head to the city. The teleportation spell was grand magic that bent space itself, so it could only cover ten kilometers at most, but that was enough right now. The real problem was that she was a poor match against the living corpses at her destination. They were much stronger than she was physically. Moreover, by nature, magic wasn't sustainable in a long fight. It could do unbelievable things, but it used great quantities of mana to make them happen. Fortunately, Yurika would have the activated mobile weapons to protect her on the edge of town. Between them and Clan's drones, she'd have plenty of backup.

"I made it, Clan-san!" she reported when she arrived. She'd followed Clan's instructions and warped next to where the mobile weapons and drones were engaging the corpses, which were too distracted to notice her.

"Good job, Yurika!" Clan cheered. In truth, she was stunned by Yurika's magic. As a scientist, she understood just how complex teleportation was, so she couldn't help her astonishment at seeing a single human accomplish it single-handedly. But her astonishment lasted only for an instant.

They had a job to do, and that was to defeat the troublesome specimens that had blended into the horde.

"So where are these enemies that you can't handle?!" Yurika asked bravely.

"Right there! The ones fighting Ralgwin's mobile weapons!" Clan pointed out.

"They have magic cast on them..." Yurika's expression turned grim as she surveyed the enemy. She could see the light of mana glowing here and there on their bodies.

"I thought as much! There are several of them in the pack! Lend me your aid, Yurika!"

"Okay!"

The troublesome specimens that Clan was talking about were the ten living corpses Grevanas had personally enhanced. She'd suspected something was strange about them based on how fast they moved, and Yurika had just confirmed it. With the sword crest on her forehead, she was able to see the same manalight Yurika was looking at—which had been impossible to detect via the drones' cameras.

"I just need to take out those guys, right?" Yurika asked.

"That's right!" Clan replied. "They're too fast for my unmanned fighters and Ralgwin's mobile weapons!"

Thanks to the power of negative spiritual energy, living corpses were fast, tough, and strong. They were also liberated from normal

physical constraints like fatigue and pain. They could move so swiftly that they pushed their very bones to the verge of breaking. And Grevanas's magic had enhanced them further, enabling them to move at truly inhuman speeds.

"Are they really that fast?" Yurika asked dubiously.

"Imagine that you're fighting Shizuka or Sanae!" Clan warned her.

"Got it!"

Unmanned craft and mobile weapons were built to fight people and vehicles, but the living corpses were harder to deal with. They were the size of human targets, but they reached speeds of a hundred kilometers per hour with the ability to change direction suddenly. The machines' firing systems had trouble keeping up. If only size or speed had been an obstacle, things would have been fine. But modern weaponry wasn't prepared to deal with fast-moving undead. They were opponents as unique as Shizuka or Sanae, so Yurika had to adapt.

"Rotten Swamp! Modifier: Effective Area, Colossal!"

Yurika's opening move was to transform the ground into a swamp, which she adjusted to be wide rather than deep.

"I see!" exclaimed Clan. "Now we can fight back!"

The living corpses were dependent on their legs to run, so muddy terrain slowed them down instantly, allowing Clan to train her weapons on them effectively. More importantly, slowing the undead down delayed them from reaching the city. And best of all, since Clan's drones were airborne, the mobile weapons could attack from a distance. Yurika's clever spell only put their enemies at a disadvantage.

"You sure know how to use your magic! I'm impressed every time!" Clan praised her.

The mobile weapons and drones were now gunning down corpses one after another, including the magically enhanced ones. They were just as slowed by the swamp, making them sitting ducks for the machines.

"I could never let the kids see me like this..."

While Yurika was at it, she used a paralyzing poison gas to defeat the living corpses. Even as undead, they were reliant on their muscles to move, leaving them vulnerable to nerve agents. All Yurika had to do was move her poison cloud around to finish them off. Naturally, said cloud didn't affect Clan's mechanical weapons. And unlike in the factory, there was no need to worry about survivors getting caught up in it. It was a brilliant strategy, yet in stark contrast to the smiling Clan, Yurika was crying for some reason.

"It looks terrible, yes..." Clan admitted. "But this is a landslide victory."

“This isn’t how a magical girl should be winning!”

“Buaaaaaargh... uuueegaaaah...”

Living corpses were half-buried and twitching in the fetid bog. Sinking into the mire forced the air out of their lungs in strange and ghastly groans. Like Clan said, it was a terrible sight. It was truly gruesome. It looked like innocent people had been left to die slow, horrific deaths in toxic wasteland.

“I-I’m sure that everyone in Nefilforan’s troops would praise you too!”

“But the children would run away crying!!!”

The kindhearted Yurika had chosen her attack to avoid violence, but despite her noble intentions, it sure didn’t look that way. Any child who saw it would surely think she was an evil magician.

Nefilforan’s unit engaged the blink beast before Koutarou and company could reach it. After hearing about the monster, Nefilforan had avoided combat with the monster out of caution. But now that it was headed for the survivors, she was forced to send her troops to intercept it.

“Our lasers can’t hit it!” one of her men cried. “They just go right through it!”

“It’s just like the intel said! We’re basically up against a hologram!” another soldier added.

“Still, it has to be close by!” a third rallied. “Send a barrage in that general direction to keep it from closing in!”

Seven soldiers fired their lasers in unison—but not at the blink beast. They knew it was just a mirage. By dispersing their fire throughout the area instead, they could keep the real monster at bay. Meanwhile, the remaining three soldiers were trying to pull survivors from the rubble. As the men worked away, a soft bell began ringing.

“It’s coming!” one of the firing soldiers shouted. “Everyone, set your distortion fields to maximum output— Whoaaaaa!”

There was a loud crack, and the man went flying like he’d just been struck by a car. The blink beast had closed in and swiped with one of its paws—although it still looked like it was ten meters away. It had left a false image of itself while attacking with magical stealth.

“Are you okay, man?!” one of the other men called.

“S-Somehow! But that nearly exhausted my distortion field! I’ll need thirty seconds to recharge!” the attacked soldier replied. Thanks to his barrier, he was okay.

“Fall to the back of our formation until you’re on line again!”

“Roger that!”

Seeing the soldier get back up, the blink beast began to back off with a growl. Living corpses weren’t capable of thought. They relied

on instinct, and the beast naturally sensed danger from prey it thought it had killed now rising back up again. It thus leaped back—both its real body and its false image—and the bell fell silent.

“Sounds like we scared it off,” the captain remarked.

“Our training is paying off!” a squad member cheered.

“After the way Instructor Yurika put us through the wringer, we’d *better* have something to show for it!” another soldier threw in.

With that, the squad captain tapped the bell hanging from his waist. It wasn’t just a decoration; it was an alarm with complex sensors built into it. During their anti-magic combat training, Nefilforan’s unit had tackled the challenge of preventing ambushes from magic-wielding enemies. Magicians could make themselves invisible and move without a sound. Forthorthe had optical camouflage of its own, but it only made a user’s appearance and heat signature difficult to distinguish from their surroundings. Magic was different. It actually made light and sound disappear, so even Forthorthe’s advanced technology struggled to detect it.

Fortunately, Forthorthian engineers had come up with a solution. By constantly scanning for noise levels and electromagnetic waves, they could detect breaks in base-level environmental patterns instead. In other words, they could detect when such stealth magic was being used. And the bell the captain was carrying was a device meant to do exactly that. Since it was made to detect even the slightest disturbances, however, it was extremely sensitive and only had a short range. It was effectively limited to melee-range opponents. But even that was a huge step toward preventing surprise attacks.

“Now... the question is whether the same trick will work twice,” the captain mused. The fact that the bell had warned the squad of an incoming ambush was proof that it worked. But that didn’t mean it would save them a second time. The creature could find a different means of attack. “Meldea, how’s it going over there?!”

“We need a minute! We’re almost done!”

“So we gotta buy a minute, huh?” the captain said to himself. He knew he needed to buy time for his subordinates to pull a survivor from the rubble. The real dilemma was how. “Keep firing! The barrage seems to be working!”

“Understood!”

The squad had yet to formulate a proper counterattack to handle the blink beast, but their laser barrage was proving an effective defense. The seven soldiers continued firing in the general direction of the beast even as the bell began ringing again.

“It’s coming!”

Based on the chime of the bell, the beast was closing in fast—yet its false image wasn’t moving this time. Everyone knew it was nothing

more than an illusion, but the men kept their eyes glued on it like it was the real deal. Because humans naturally relied on their sight, illusions were dangerous and deadly tricks.

“How is it getting close in this barrage?! Is it not working after all?!”

The troops couldn’t see the monster, but the clamoring bell told them it was close now. Somehow, it was speeding nearer despite the volley of lasers. And it was hard to imagine the giant animal dodging them all. Either they were actually hitting it, or they were firing in the completely wrong direction.

Suddenly, a piece of the ceiling crashed to the ground in front of the soldiers. It appeared to be nothing more than coincidence—the factory crumbling in the aftermath of the explosion. But one soldier suspected otherwise.

“Captain! Above us!” he shouted.

“Aha! It’s kicking off the wall and ceiling to— Aaaggghhh!” the captain screamed.

The warning hadn’t come soon enough. The blink beast was rapidly moving in three dimensions, kicking off of chairs, desks, walls, and the ceiling. And it struck just as it reached the group of soldiers. Its target was none other than the squad captain. Aiming for the leader of the pack was a wild animal’s instinct, and its massive claws zoomed toward the captain. While he had his distortion field up, the blink beast’s attack was supercharged by the momentum of its descent from the ceiling. Unable to bear the full brunt of the swipe, the barrier collapsed.

“Captain!!!”

The soldiers screamed when they saw the beast strike their leader. Luckily, he survived the blow. His barrier had broken the impact of the attack, but even so, he was in grave condition and bleeding badly.

“What are you doing?! Open fire! You can aim for the beast now!” he ordered.

“U-Understood!”

In a strange twist, the captain’s blood was just what they needed to turn the tables. The blink beast was invisible, but its footprints weren’t, and one of its front paws was now covered in blood. The soldiers could track the beast by its prints.

“And shoot me too,” the captain continued.

“What?! But—”

“I’ll turn into one of them soon! Don’t let me attack you!”

The soldiers’ barriers protected them from the negative spiritual energy, but the blink beast had broken through to strike the captain directly. He was right. Odds were that he was already infected. It would only be a matter of time before he turned on his squadmates,

and he wanted to prevent that at all costs. He'd made the right call, but that didn't make the order easy for his subordinates to accept.

"I can't shoot you, Captain! You might not be infected!"

"Do it before it's too late!"

Not a second later, the soldiers were all blinded by a surging cloud of white smoke from seemingly nowhere. They could tell it was the doing of a smoke grenade—but they had no idea who'd thrown it or from where.

"Never fear!" a new voice called. "Help has arrived in the nick of time!"

As the shaken captain tried to decipher the situation, a lone girl appeared from the smoke. She looked completely out of place in the burning factory. She was dressed casually, like she was going out shopping, and she had a clay figure floating on either side of her head. They looked like ancient deities. The puzzled captain only grew more confused.

"You were right not to shoot him," said the girl. "We can still save him."

"We can still save him, ho!"

"It's our time to shine, ho!"

"Who... are you?" the captain asked.

"Don't you worry!"

The girl in question skipped over to the squad captain and raised her palms to his wound as the two floating clay dolls began circling around her. In short order, the bleeding stopped and the pain receded. At the same time, the area around the wound that had started turning black reverted to the color of healthy skin. The captain's fever and urge to vomit also diminished considerably. Only then did he finally realize he'd seen the girl in front of him before.



“Okay, you’ll be fine now,” she said.

“I see... You’re part of His Excellency’s band...” the captain murmured.

“That’s right! I’m Sanae-chan the Purple Knight!”

“And I’m the Flame Knight of Justice, Karama!”

“Cat Knight Korama at your service, ho!”

Sanae’s psychic powers, enhanced by the haniwas, had purged the negative spiritual energy polluting the squad captain’s body. In addition, she’d healed his wound with her surplus power. The opening smoke grenade had only been a measure to buy time—but not just for her. When the white smoke cleared, it revealed a five-meter steel giant and seven girls on the scene.

“The Blue Knight! You’re here!” the captain shouted.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” replied Koutarou. “You did well to hold out for so long.”

“You honor me, Your Excellency.”

The smoke screen had allowed Sanae to close in and heal the captain. It had also stopped the blink beast from interfering with any of the rescue work. And it had afforded Koutarou and the other girls an opportunity to get close without getting ambushed by the monster.

“Ruth-san, the injured have all been rescued now,” Harumi reported.

“Understood!” replied Ruth. “To Nefilforan’s squad, please retreat with the survivors! You can leave this to us!”

“Roger that. We wish you the best of luck,” the captain confirmed.

Nefilforan’s troops now understood just how dangerous the blink beast was. It was too risky to stay and fight while also trying to protect the rescued factory workers. It was safest to withdraw with the wounded. They would have loved to fight alongside the Blue Knight, but a tactical retreat was the best option for everyone.

The blink beast was wary of the white smoke and the new opponents who’d appeared from within it. It was especially cautious of Warlord, the biggest among them. Living corpses were primal rather than rational, and the blink beast instinctually targeted the steel giant.

“All right, let’s get this started...”

Koutarou was equally leery of his opponent. The blink beast could use illusions and teleportation. It was as big as Warlord, too, and no doubt just as powerful. He knew the monster could take him down in a single attack if he let his guard down.

“Aika-san, Sakuraba-senpai, can you do something about its magic?” he asked.

“I’ve tried several different detection spells, but they’re not

working,” Maki replied. “I think the monster is concealing its mana and spiritual energy.”

Wild beasts, especially predators, were skilled in stealth. And for magical beasts, that included learning how to camouflage their mana. It was an important part of their survival, so even an expert magician like Maki was having trouble tracking the monster down.

“Satomi-kun, I will extend the range of your sword’s slashes. I think maximum-area attacks are the only way to deal with this foe,” offered Harumi.

“You’re probably right...” he agreed.

That was their solution. Harumi would imbue Warlord’s sword with Signaltin’s mana so that he could fight as he normally did while she enhanced the blade, including its range. After all, a longer sword was better against a foe they couldn’t see.

“Master, that won’t be necessary,” Ruth interjected. “I know where the enemy is.”

This news staggered Koutarou. “Wait, *what?!*” he asked in a stupor. “What do you mean?”

“Please look at this,” Ruth answered calmly while bringing up an image of a four-legged creature on her computer. It was a model she’d generated, which showed the blink beast’s current location and posture.

“How did you do this, Ruth-san?!”

“The smoke grenade earlier gave me an idea. The enemy can completely negate its presence, but it can’t affect the air around it. So when it moves, naturally it displaces air too, and I’m using Yellow Line’s sensors to monitor that displacement.”

While watching the smoke dissipate, Ruth had noticed it moving around various objects in the room and realized something similar must be happening with the blink beast. And Yellow Line’s powerful sensors were the perfect thing to detect it.

“I’m also using laser measurements of ground vibrations as an aid,” Ruth continued to explain. “The enemy cannot escape Warlord III-Revised’s watchful eyes.”

Certain variables, like accuracy and timing, came into play when measuring air currents. So to compensate for that, Ruth was also measuring ground vibrations, which would be gauged swiftly and precisely. And with all of the information she’d collected, she’d constructed the model she was showing Koutarou. It wasn’t a perfectly accurate real-time display, but it was close enough.

“That’s something only Ruth would notice, and something only she could pull off. The second seat is already paying off,” Kiriha remarked with a smirk. Even she was surprised.

Ruth had only noticed the way the smoke was moving because she

was in the vanguard with Koutarou. Had she been on the rear line, she might have missed it entirely. Even if she'd realized it, she wouldn't have had the necessary sensors to measure it at her fingertips. And she was the only one capable of collecting and analyzing the data to come up with a model of their enemy on the spot. Having her aboard Warlord with Yellow Line equipped was already paying off.

"Well done, Vice Captain," said Koutarou. He was as stunned as he was grateful. He then drew Warlord's sword. Now that the tables had turned, there was no need for petty tricks. The giant blade began glowing with Signaltin's mana like normal.

"It's an honor, Master," Ruth replied. Praise from her commander brought her immense joy, for he was both a legendary knight and the man she loved. It tickled her heart, both as a knight herself and as a woman.

I will protect him from any enemy or danger! And I shall assist his victory in every battle!

Determination glimmered in Ruth's eyes. Her skills and desires had never aligned in a way that allowed her to fight alongside Koutarou, but right now, she could protect him with her own strength and help him seize victory. She'd never been more eager for a mission.

"Everyone, move out!"

Naturally, the order to attack came from Theia. Ruth had shared her intel with the princess as well, another function enhanced by Yellow Line. Theia's Combat Dress overlaid the model of the blink beast directly onto Theia's vision, allowing her to fight as if she could see the creature. Theia was currently equipped with her Command Green accessory for maximum flexibility, and its primary weapon was an assault rifle that fired a constant stream of bullets. Theia's marksmanship was good, and she fought the wild recoil of the weapon to keep its fire locked on the monster.

It let out a confused cry when struck, which was a new experience for the blink beast. Nothing had ever before landed an attack on it while it was using its invisibility and illusions. Naturally, it felt no pain as a living corpse, but if it had been alive, it would have been left reeling.

The blink beast then let out another roar. The first wave of Theia's barrage had disappeared into the invisible monster, but her bullets now passed through the CG model and landed in the wall behind it. The model itself then disappeared.

"What just happened?!" Theia shouted in confusion.

"It blinked! It's using short-range teleportation!" Maki explained.

This was the blink beast's third power. Its unique combination of abilities meant it could move from place to place in the blink of an eye, hence its name.

“It must have used that power by reflex to escape the bullets... but that was a mistake!”

“Hyaaaaah!”

As soon as the blink beast reappeared in a new location, it was greeted by Shizuka’s fist. The monster’s instantaneous teleportation left it momentarily disoriented and vulnerable. That meant it was completely open to Shizuka’s attack, which struck the beast with great force. It let out a mighty yelp.

“Take that! Hyah! And that!”

Shizuka continued to assault the beast with one attack after another. With the strength of a dragon inside her, each blow hit with the power of a cannon. Her aim was true too. She targeted the creature’s joints, jaw, and other vital points.

She’d known exactly where the blink beast would be *because* it had teleported. Since Alunaya could manipulate gravity, he could sense spatial distortions. So when the beast bent space to teleport, Shizuka saw it—albeit for a brief moment. The warped space quickly returned to normal, but that was more than long enough for Shizuka. Before she lost sight of it, she’d punched it eight times, kicked it twice, and knocked it down.

“It seems this beast can use magic instinctively, but it’s just magic. It doesn’t affect the flow of air or vibrations of the ground. Likewise, the monster doesn’t know about gravitational waves, so it doesn’t know how to cover them up. We have the advantage of science on our side. If this creature were as intelligent as Clan-dono, we likely never could have detected it,” Kiriha mused.

She was in the process of unraveling the blink beast’s abilities and their limits. The monster’s inborn magic was both a strength and a weakness. Since magic manipulated reality according to the caster’s will, the caster’s perception of the world was reflected in that. In simple terms, the beast couldn’t compensate for forces it didn’t even know existed. Ruth and Shizuka were preying on that.

“Master, the enemy is running!” Ruth called.

“Is it fleeing because it sensed danger?” Koutarou wondered.

“No!” Sanae shouted. “It’s being called by that black sludge! And not just it! All of the zombies are being called!”

“What?!” Koutarou shouted in turn.

Their enemy wasn’t going to go down without a fight. After being attacked repeatedly, the blink beast was mortally wary of Koutarou and the girls—a fear that was relayed back to the spiritual energy waste and then to the other living corpses. In order to survive, the spiritual energy waste intended to consolidate its power. In other words, it was gathering all of its forces.

At first, the spiritual energy waste had no clear consciousness. But that changed after absorbing humans with the ability to think, and its mind now responded to the fear it sensed in the blink beast under its influence. It recognized a threat to its existence, so in order to ensure its survival, it was summoning its minions to protect itself.

Of course, after Clan had awoken the mobile weapons planted in the city, not many living corpses were left. Still, their real power was spiritual energy. Even if their bodies were destroyed, the negative spiritual energy that powered them could still return. So when the waste recalled all of the energy at its disposal, it surged with power far greater than it had originally possessed. This was thanks to the spreading infection, and the waste fully intended to use its newfound power to defeat Koutarou and the others.

“You mean the corpses weren’t just to increase their ranks?!” Koutarou gasped when Sanae explained what was happening.

“Yeah!” she confirmed. “This factory is like a farm for that black stuff to get stronger!”

Sanae had only just put it together herself. Like on a cattle farm, the living corpses had been allowed to multiply freely. And now that they’d reached a sufficient population, they were being culled for the resources they provided. Effectively, they were being called to the slaughterhouse.

“Is this what Grevanas was after?” Koutarou muttered.

“It’s hard to imagine,” Kiriha replied. “Grevanas had no reason to blow up the factory. It was just an accident, so it’s more like Grevanas and the waste used each other.”

Kiriha didn’t believe that Grevanas had orchestrated the spiritual energy waste. She couldn’t imagine he’d rigged such a disaster just to intercept them. Even if it successfully took them out, it meant using the entire stronghold as collateral. That wasn’t worth sacrificing everything here, and she was sure Grevanas knew that. If he’d plotted something on such a destructive scale, he would’ve unleashed it in a city rather than Ralgwin’s factory. That was why she suspected he was merely using the circumstances to his advantage, and the spiritual energy waste had similarly benefited from the living corpses he’d conjured and the beasts he’d summoned.

“You mean Grevanas...” Koutarou began.

“He’s long gone by now,” Theia concluded with a nod. “He wouldn’t know how strong the waste has gotten until we fight it, and there’s no way he’d stick around for that. So after stirring up all this chaos, he probably took what he needed and ran. He wants to resurrect Maxfern, so he won’t take any unnecessary gambles.”

Theia was certain of that much. If she were Grevanas, she would have done the same. The initial accident was unexpected, so his

priority would have undoubtedly been minimizing other risks. And the risk of fighting Koutarou and the girls alongside the waste when he didn't know its strength was simply too high. Instead, he simply would have gathered his resources and fled.

"Maybe we're lucky the mean old wizard ran away," said Sanae.

"Why's that?" Koutarou asked.

"Because this thing is pretty nasty..."

When Sanae saw the spiritual energy waste, she recognized the danger at hand. As an expert on spiritual energy, she could tell at a glance that the waste was extraordinarily powerful. Her usual smile had given way to a grave expression, and cold sweat was running down her face.

After recalling the negative energy throughout the stronghold, the waste reformed itself. It needed to transform from black sludge to something more suitable for a fight, and the form it chose was the blink beast. The blink beast was the strongest of the living corpses it had consumed. It was the only one that had survived the mobile weapons, much less defeated any. It was also agile and tough. So, using the blink beast as its core, the waste poured all of its spiritual energy into the creature. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say it took over the beast. They became one, and the new horrific monster the process generated was both intelligent and undead.

"Sanae-chan Ultra Burning Fire Mega Hurricane!"

A massive vortex whirled around the beast. The vortex produced neither wind nor flame, but it kept the giant creature trapped within. Even the blink beast struggled to overcome Sanae-chan's incredible power when she went all out.

"Use this sword, Onee-chan!" Sanae-san called, tossing Saguratin to her older self.

"Got it! Saguratin, chaaarge!" Sanae-nee took the blade and filled it with spiritual energy. The sword began glowing purple with a light just as strong as Koutarou's shining Signaltin.

"Take this! Special Sanae Combo Attack!" Sanae-chan cried.

"Purple Lightning Flash! Dominating Thunder Boooooolt!" Sanae-nee likewise yelled as she attacked.

Her slash wasn't actually wreathed in lightning, but she'd poured so much spiritual energy into it that it was just as powerful as any thunderbolt. The roaring sword tore toward the blink beast. The creature was still trapped in the vortex, but Sanae-nee's sword passed right through it. This incredible feat was the result of the Sanaes' teamwork. Because they all shared the same spiritual energy, their attacks could harm their enemies but not each other.

But the blink beast roared loudly as it met Sanae-nee's mighty blow. The positive energy shrouding the sword clashed with the

negative energy in its claws, and Sanae-nee was at a disadvantage. The beast was stronger and had more energy to spare, ultimately pushing her back.

"I was afraid of that!" Sanae-chan said, looking desperate as she watched Sanae-nee fly backward. She quickly slapped her bracelet to activate the comms. "Koutarou!"

"What is it?" he answered.

"It really is thinking while fighting now! It's completely different from before, so be careful!"

Sanae-chan's desperation wasn't because Sanae-nee had been overpowered. It was because she'd recognized the blink beast's clever interception of Sanae-nee's attack. If it were purely fighting on instinct like before, it would have mindlessly attacked the vortex keeping it trapped, which would have left it vulnerable to Sanae-nee's slicing and dicing. But instead, it had focused its response on her—the real threat. This demonstrated understanding that the vortex was nothing more than a binding. In other words, this version of the blink beast was smart. It was no longer a simple monster.

"Blue Knight, it's going to blink to escape the vortex!"

Immediately following Alunaya's warning, the blink beast disappeared from within the vortex. It had escaped using its natural teleportation abilities. If it had tried to do so sooner, it would have left itself open to Sanae's attack. It only attempted to flee after ensuring it could do so safely—another sign of its intelligence.

"Why did it suddenly get so smart?" Koutarou looked around from within Warlord, but he saw no sign of the monster.

"It probably gained the abilities of the creatures it consumed. Otherwise, it shouldn't be able to teleport," Kiriha reasoned.

Blink beasts could teleport naturally, but not the waste. That meant it had gained something more than just energy from the monster. It could now use its magic too, so it wasn't a stretch to assume it was gaining other powers—intelligence included—from its other prey.

"Master, I can't detect the enemy anymore! It seems to be compensating for air currents and ground vibrations now!"

"So it's overcome its weakness!"

The waste had also absorbed factory engineers, giving it new insight into its own existence... and a mind capable of making plans accordingly. It was making up for its shortcomings, even when it came to mana and gravitational waves.

"Kyaaaaah!"

Because of this, not even Alunaya could tell where the beast had teleported. It thus blindsided Shizuka with an attack, knocking her to the ground. She quickly sprang back up thanks to the protection of

Alunaya's powerful mana. Anyone else would have been in serious danger.

The blink beast was more than just intelligent now. Its merger with the spiritual energy waste had enhanced its powers of illusion and invisibility.

"Everyone, please gather up in one place!" Clan requested over the comms.

"What are you trying to do?!" Koutarou asked.

"Just hurry! Do you want to get killed?!" she responded.

"Everyone on me!" Koutarou called.

The girls fell in and gathered around him.

"Whoa!" Theia yelled in the process. She'd been attacked, but her keen senses had allowed her to avoid the strike by a hair's breadth. It left a massive gouge in her Combat Dress instead.

"Now, Pardomshiha!" Clan shouted.

"Right!"

The moment everyone was together, Ruth's unmanned crafts and Ralgwin's mobile weapons started gathering around them as well. The blink beast was so large that if it tried to attack now, it would have to pass through the encirclement of machines first. It wasn't an ideal tactic, but it was good for a desperate measure.

"The problem is what we do next," Koutarou observed.

For now, the blink beast could no longer ambush them. But Koutarou and the girls needed to do better than that. The drones and mobile weapons were already falling one by one as the blink beast used its magic to get rid of them carefully. There wasn't much time.

"An explosive attack would be effective, but we'd have to accept that the factory would collapse, which I'd prefer not to do," Kiriha said over the comms.

That was the first solution that had come to mind, but it was extreme. Just because the beast was invisible didn't mean it wasn't there. An indiscriminate wide-area explosion would certainly catch it too. The problem was that such an attack would also catch Koutarou, the girls, and the rest of the factory. It would have to be a last resort.

"Not having Yurika right now hurts. Sakuraba-senpai and I can't use magic together..." said Maki.

She would have loved to cast a wide-area spell, preferably a ritual spell, to interfere with the blink beast's magic. But that would require multiple magicians to be more effective, and Yurika was still with the Hazy Moon's drones on the outskirts of town. That left only Harumi, who used a different type of magic. There were discrepancies in the magical theory behind modern and ancient magics, making them difficult to combine. The best Harumi and Maki could do together was share mana.

“We can’t afford to let it escape! We would never be able to capture it again! Whatever the method, we need to defeat it here and now!” Harumi insisted with increasing urgency.

The blink beast was attacking because it thought it could defeat Koutarou and the girls quickly. Perhaps it even believed that it was wisest to kill off them as soon as possible. But if their defenses proved too difficult to overcome or if they put up too much of a fight, the blink beast would reassess and retreat. And if it wanted to flee, there was nothing Koutarou and the girls could do to stop it. The beast was impossible to track. Wherever it went, it would create more living corpses. By the time they found it, it would be too late. So Harumi was right. They needed to defeat the blink beast before it got away.

“Master, our defensive wall has been reduced to 60 percent. It’s almost at its limit!” Ruth reported.

Worst of all, time was working against them. The unmanned crafts and mobile weapons wouldn’t hold out for much longer. They were still falling one after another. Koutarou and the girls couldn’t afford to stop and think of a plan.

“Then there’s only one thing to do,” said Koutarou. “Sakurabasenpai, please put up several wide barriers. They don’t have to be strong.”

“What are you going to do, Satomi-kun?!” Harumi was taken aback. She had no idea what Koutarou was up to, but nevertheless, she poured more magic into Signaltin and generated three layers of barriers around Warlord.

“The only thing we can do,” Koutarou replied. With that, he raised Warlord’s sword and shifted the machine’s weight to its back leg.

Ruth, an expert in Forthorthian swordsmanship, knew immediately what he was doing. “You’re going for a counter, Master,” she said with an approving nod.

She saw the value in the strategy. When the blink beast next attacked Warlord, it would destroy Harumi’s barriers. Using that as a signal, Koutarou could counterattack.

“I shall assist you,” Ruth continued with a smile.

She then altered Warlord’s distortion field to create a second triple-layer barrier. It was a simple task using the PAF’s control algorithm. But without increasing the energy output of the device, each of the three barriers was weaker than normal. Still, they would be good enough to serve as a signal.

“Attaboy, Koutarou!” Sanae cheered.

“Lightning Reflexes! Eagle Eye!” Maki incanted.

The other girls realized what Koutarou was doing and began offering their own support too. The Sanaes heightened Koutarou’s psychic powers, and Maki enhanced his reflexes and vision with

magic. Both would help him time his blow.

“Thank you, everyone. Also... I’m sorry for putting you in danger, Ruth-san,” he said.

With his sword at the ready, Koutarou began advancing with Warlord. There was no time to let Ruth out. The machine was already outside of the defensive encirclement of drones and mobile weapons. The attack could come at any moment from any angle.

“Not at all, Master. This is what I want. No matter what happens, we share the same fate,” Ruth replied.

Between Maki’s magic and the PAF, Warlord III-Revised now had a total of six barriers. Koutarou needed to make full use of them to land his counter. He would only get one chance. The same move wouldn’t work twice on the new blink beast. But he had no idea where his opponent was. He wouldn’t even be able to see it when it happened. He’d simply have to thrust his sword in the direction of the force that shattered the barriers. It was a risky move. The end result might put them in harm’s way instead. But Ruth was fine with that. If she did everything in her power together with Koutarou yet still lost, she would be satisfied with that—both as vice captain and as a woman.

“We’ll just have to win,” said Koutarou.

“Of course. That is what it means to walk the path of knighthood!” Ruth insisted.

“You’re so strict, Ruth-san...”

Ruth wasn’t concerned about what might happen. All that mattered to her was that they fought with the intent to win. Koutarou flashed a smile at his knightly copilot and readjusted his grip on his sword. He felt no hesitation. Like Ruth, he now had his eyes on victory.

When the outermost barrier fell with a crack, Signaltin alerted Koutarou directly via mental link.

Here it comes!

Thanks to that, he realized the blink beast was attacking before anyone else and ordered Warlord to do an about-face. By then, the third barrier had already been breached. Once the machine turned completely around, Koutarou watched as the fourth barrier fell.

“There you aaaaare!”

Koutarou thrust out his sword as the fifth barrier gave way. He knew the blink beast was coming.

“Did I get it?!”

His sword stopped at the sixth barrier—the blade had disappeared there, but it wasn’t broken. Instead, Koutarou felt like he’d hit something. The “missing” part of his sword was buried in the invisible monster. And soon, the creature came into view with a roar. Signaltin

was canceling out the beast's magic.

"Huh? Is it trying to get away?!"

Warlord began shaking violently. The blink beast was trying to shake itself loose from the blade impaled in its shoulder. The creature was wounded, but not fatally, so it was determined to get away at all costs.

"I don't think so!"

Koutarou used his left arm to resist. If the blink beast freed itself, it would turn invisible again and flee—and Koutarou was determined to prevent that.

"You're not going anywhere!"

In short order, several unmanned crafts came flying in. With the blink beast's invisibility negated, Ruth now had a visual on their foe and ordered her fighters to ram it. Her plan was to pin it in place with the drones.

On impact, the blink beast let out another yowl. It was warded in the strong negative spiritual energy from the factory, allowing it to escape both Koutarou's sword and Ruth's encirclement. And just as Koutarou expected, the beast immediately fled, turning invisible as it turned its back on them.

"It got away?!" Koutarou gasped with a terrible grimace on his face. Dark thoughts of what would happen next brewed in his mind. He was sure they'd failed.

"No, Master. We've won," said Ruth.

An instant later, the blink beast reappeared on Warlord's monitors. But not its real form. It was the CG model from before.

"How?!" Koutarou asked.

"Several unmanned crafts are sticking to it," Ruth explained.

"From when you rammed it!"

"And they're relaying their current positions to the other unmanned crafts using all possible communication methods."

Ruth hadn't ordered her drones to ram the blink beast *just* to hold it in place. She was using some of them like tracking devices. The blink beast was using magic to counter normal detection methods, but there were exceptions. Its magic had no effect on wired comms, and lasers and radio waves still worked at very close range. So as long as some of Ruth's drones could stay close to the ones stuck on the beast, she'd have all the information she needed. That was how she'd located the creature again.

"You do the most incredible things like they're nothing, Ruth-san..."

Though impressed, Koutarou immediately charged the beast with Warlord. He didn't have the luxury of reveling in the moment. He needed to defeat the blink beast while he could see it.

“Only because of you, Master. This is all because you stopped the creature from moving.”

Ruth’s strategy had been a gamble, and she’d bet everything on Koutarou locking the blink beast in combat briefly. Her desire to see him victorious had inspired her.

“Guess who made it?!” a lone girl called out, appearing right in the path of the fleeing blink beast.

When Maki saw the new arrival, she let out a gasp. “Crimson?! What are you doing here—”

Indeed, the new face on the scene was none other than a former evil magical girl turned Forthorthian court magician—Crimson. She raised her two-handed staff above her head and jumped up high. Her target was the blink beast, which she could see thanks to the information being relayed to her.

“Save the chitchat for later! First we deal with this thing!” she yelled. “Haaaaah!”

Just before her staff made contact with the beast, she magically transformed it into a large axe. It slammed into the blink beast’s front leg and released the energy stored within with a loud crack. The heavy impact made the monster lose its balance. It collapsed to the factory floor, roaring wildly as it slid several meters down the hall before finally coming to a stop.



“You’re not even a challenge as long as I can see you! Okay, everyone, take it from here!” Crimson shouted.

“You help too, Crimson!” Green insisted.

“I’m not really cut out for dealing with this confusing magic.”

“God, you’re always like this... Anti-Magic Field!”

Crimson wasn’t the only former agent of Darkness Rainbow who’d arrived. Green, Purple, Yellow, Blue, and Orange were all with her. They surrounded the collapsed beast and worked together to cast a wide-area spell around it to cancel out all magic. With that, the blink beast’s invisibility was once again nullified. It couldn’t use any of its other spells either, meaning it couldn’t escape by blinking or other magical trickery. Of course, this also meant the court magicians were defenseless too, but that wasn’t a problem. They had plenty of allies on the scene who could protect them.

“In the end, they stole all the glory,” Theia mumbled.

“It’s fine,” Sanae-chan said. “Ruth got her chance to shine.”

“Ruth-san is the one person I wouldn’t want to make angry. To think she was *that* strong...” Shizuka added.

“And that means something coming from you, Shizuka.”

“Sanae-oneechan!”

Theia opened fire, Sanae let fly her psychic powers, and Shizuka chucked a massive concrete block. All three attacks were aimed squarely at the vulnerable beast. It naturally tried to flee, but its magic was unresponsive. And so the monster was finally defeated.

Forthorthe’s court magicians had come to ensure the subjugation of the blink beast. They had nothing to fear from the beast’s blinking powers thanks to their magic nullification zone, but they hadn’t been able to counter its invisibility or pin it down. And so they’d been lying in wait, hoping and waiting for Koutarou and the girls to do something about that.

“So that’s why you only showed up now,” remarked Maki.

“That’s right,” said Green. “But Crimson was hellbent on getting into the fray. She’s such a handful.”

“I feel your pain,” Maki replied with a smile. Judging by Crimson’s dramatic entrance, she could imagine how long her best friend had been waiting to enter the fight.

“Rude. I can show some patience when I need to,” Crimson argued.

“You were irked the entire time though,” Green argued back.

“That’s just proof I was being patient!”

With a warm look in her eyes, Maki chuckled at Crimson and Green’s banter. She was sure Crimson was enjoying herself too. It was

an unexpected but wonderful reunion.

“Still, it’s sure convenient you guys were here,” said Koutarou, taking advantage of the lull to join in the conversation.

Orange, who was sitting on a concrete block wall with Sanae, kicked her legs as she replied, “We discovered this stronghold, and Her Majesty ordered us to stand by here in case of an emergency.”

“So you’re all still acting like spies,” Sanae remarked.

“Yup,” said Orange. “We just work for Forthorthe now.”

Elfaria had originally ordered her new court magicians to locate Ralgwin’s bases. After investigating several smaller ones, they’d finally uncovered his stronghold, but it was too large for them to raid alone. Moreover, Forthorthe wanted to keep magic out of the public eye as much as possible. And so Elfaria had instructed them to wait for Koutarou and Nefilforan. As magicians, they were equipped to deal with any situation that might arise. They’d even helped clean up the negative spiritual energy after the fact.

“Thanks to you, this ordeal is finally over, but... Ralgwin’s key players here managed to escape,” said Nefilforan, her shoulders slumping.

Forthorthe’s goal in striking the stronghold had been to gather intelligence. Besides hacking into the mainframe, capturing officers was their top priority—and the quickest way to corner Ralgwin.

“Well, they were prepared for an attack, so there’s nothing we could have done. Not to mention the accident. What happened here wasn’t a failing on our part,” said Clan, offering Nefilforan a gentle smile.

She was trying to console her fellow princess, but she spoke the truth. Ralgwin had armed his stronghold for just such a raid, establishing escape routes and fail-safes for disposing of critical intel. But the factory accident had ruined things for everyone. There was no way they could have done any reconnaissance under the circumstances.

“The old wizard didn’t attack us himself, so he must have been in a hurry too,” Shizuka reminded everyone.

That was true too. In the end, Grevanas’s only meddling had been indirect. Shizuka believed it was because he’d had no control over the situation either, so instead, he’d chosen to play it safe.

“What do you make of that, Kiriha-san?” Koutarou asked.

“Hmm... I believe taking this stronghold is a satisfactory result for us. This will be a major setback for Ralgwin and our single biggest victory to date.”

Kiriha was satisfied with the outcome. It bothered her to see a factory capable of producing spiritual energy technology so badly damaged, but she was pleased to see it liberated from Ralgwin’s

hands. That was enough of a win for her. She thought Ralgwin's loss today was much bigger. The factory explosion had prevented his troops from defending themselves according to plan. If they'd managed that, they might have succeeded in repelling Koutarou and Nefilforan altogether.

"So you're saying they underestimated the technology they're dealing with and paid the price for it," Koutarou summarized.

"That's right. If they'd properly disposed of the negative spiritual energy, this wouldn't have happened," Kiriha explained.

Indeed, the source of that misfortune was the enemy's lax handling of the spiritual energy waste. Their greed had slipped a noose around their own necks, and the day's disaster was nothing more than reaping what they'd sown.

Kiriha's assessment of the situation was correct. When Grevanas returned to home base, he found Ralgwin furious. He took the loss of the factory seriously, severely reprimanding the officer in charge of it. Ralgwin hadn't personally been the one to sacrifice safety for the sake of efficiency—that had been the production manager, who had also served as Grevanas's tour guide. That simple trade-off had been the cause of the disaster, resulting in a devastating loss and necessitating an overhaul of Ralgwin's strategy. His rage would not be easily abated.

"Calm down, Ralgwin-dono," Grevanas urged him. "The result may have been the same whether we handled the waste properly or not."

"I know that! But just think of the force they attacked us with—and try imagining what would happen if they struck any other base! We can't afford to have careless accidents like this!" Ralgwin fumed.

"Still, it's not all bad. We may be able to add a new weapon to our arsenal thanks to this."

"What do you mean?!"

"This waste product is rich in negative spiritual energy. It turns any creature that touches it into a living corpse... meaning we could have a self-generating army." Grevanas had brought back a sample of the spiritual energy waste in a pressurized container. His aim was to research it in detail and see if he could develop it into an infectious weapon not dissimilar from the virus he'd developed for Maxfern. "I'd say it's necessary given our small numbers, but what do you think, Ralgwin-dono?"

"I see... That could indeed make up for our losses this time. So be it. I'll overlook the factory incident, but there *had better not* be a repeat. Is that clear?"

"Y-Yes, sir! Thank you very much!"

Grevanas had finally managed to calm Ralgwin. The soldier in charge of the factory repeatedly bowed and thanked Ralgwin as he left the room.

“Now, can we really weaponize that?” Ralgwin asked Grevanas afterward.

“I’ve found signs it’s controllable to some degree. If all we’re after is destructive potential, we can use it as it is, but if we want to employ it on complex missions, it will need to be made compatible with our other technologies.”

“Use all the manpower and money you need to do it. We need to bolster our forces and recover.”

“Then I shall make that my priority.”

This latest defeat had made Ralgwin more dependent on Grevanas, and the old wizard couldn’t have asked for more. The current situation made it easier for him to work in secret. If all went well, he might even be able to build an army of his own. He knew a battle awaited upon Maxfern’s revival, and intended to begin preparations for it now.

How It's Put to Use

Tuesday, October 4th

When it came to teatime, Elfaria liked to disconnect. She drank tea to relax, and technology wasn't conducive to that. That was why she only began brewing her drink of choice after she'd separated herself from computers and the like. Right now, she was surrounded by antique furniture in her private quarters—an environment she highly prized for enjoying tea. There are exceptions to everything, however, and right now, Elfaria was breaking her own rules to have a virtual monitor in the room. On it was the news, which was being projected by a comms terminal.

“...DKI Medical has begun a trial of early-run PAFs, giving priority to the severely disabled and children...”

The current news concerned the PAF. Testing had started on model PAFs, and the stations were showing footage of a seven-year-old boy who'd lost a leg in an accident. Children had lots of growing ahead of them, so artificial limbs for them had to be adjusted and swapped out repeatedly over time. But the PAF negated the need for such adjustments. The moment it activated, it generated a barrier that fit the boy's body perfectly. He was surprised at first, but soon realized what was going on and started running around. He went on to play in the prepared testing facility, and his PAF held up without issue. His parents were in tears, remarking that they hadn't seen their son like this since the accident.

“Looks like everything's going all right,” Koutarou said with a smile, a cup in hand. He was in the room with Elfaria. At first they'd just been sharing some tea, but since the PAF trials had started while he was out on the stronghold mission, they'd decided to catch up on the news together.

“It is. Several locations are running tests, and the results are all positive so far,” Elfaria explained.

The footage shifted away from the boy to a rescue team in the middle of training exercise in a narrow and compromised hallway where a gurney would be unusable. The rescue workers were using PAFs to carry a life-sized dummy on a litter. Despite its weight, they maneuvered around obstacles with ease, quickly transporting the dummy to an awaiting emergency vehicle.

“The device is Clan's brainchild. Of course it's getting good

results,” Koutarou remarked.

“I’m sure she’d be thrilled to hear you say that,” Elfaria replied.

“Yeah, well, a man has his pride...”

“Oh my, heehee.”

As Elfaria giggled, the news report came to an end. Her eyes then naturally fell on Koutarou and vice versa.

“I’ve been thinking, Elle... Power is all about how you put it to use.”

“Yes. We learned that all too well after the incident the other day.”

Koutarou had been reflecting on the news and what happened on Ikoran. Clan’s PAF and Ralgwin’s spiritual energy technology were comparable, but Koutarou had identified a crucial difference between them. And it wasn’t the technologies themselves. Rather, it was the intention behind them. The ambition for them. That was the determining factor in their fates—what made the difference between a child playing happily and a living corpse.

“And I gotta say... you put your skill with tea to good use,” Koutarou continued, looking down at the cup in his hand. It was full of tea Elfaria had made with skill she’d honed and refined over time—a power she was now using to soothe and comfort. He thought that was as noble as Clan’s inventiveness.

“You honor me. Your skill with a blade is quite remarkable too, Layous-sama,” Elfaria replied, smiling warmly. She thought his swordsmanship was noble too. He’d learned it for an act, but he now wielded it to protect.

“You think so? Sure didn’t feel like it helped me this time,” Koutarou said with a shrug. He didn’t feel worthy of Elfaria’s praise. Too many lives had been lost on Ikoran. Regret haunted him. He couldn’t help wondering how he might have done more.

“You saved the day, Layous-sama,” Elfaria reminded him.

“Not by my sword, no. We would’ve been in trouble without Clan or Ruth-san. And if not for the PAFs and mobile weapons, there would have been more casualties,” he argued.

The early-issue PAFs had been instrumental in the rescue effort, and the hijacked mobile weapons had been the key to defeating the living corpses threatening to besiege the city. The court magicians had also been the ones to subdue the blink beast. If not for all of that, the incident would have been far worse.

“It’s not strictly about results. The spirit you put into your sword—your heart—is what matters. You led everyone on that mission, all for the sake of us Forthorthians. Isn’t that good use too?”

Elfaria saw the situation differently. In her eyes, Koutarou had defended everyone in the factory, and that alone was noble. It didn’t

matter how he'd specifically contributed to the day's victory. It wasn't always about the bottom line. Even without saving someone, for example, the PAF was remarkable. The same was true of Koutarou's valor. As long as he led the way, there would be people who followed. His sword was what had guided Clan and Ruth. Elfaria knew he'd done an important job.

"I guess that's Forthorthian chivalry for you..." Koutarou was able to smile again thanks to Elfaria, whose words lightened his heart.

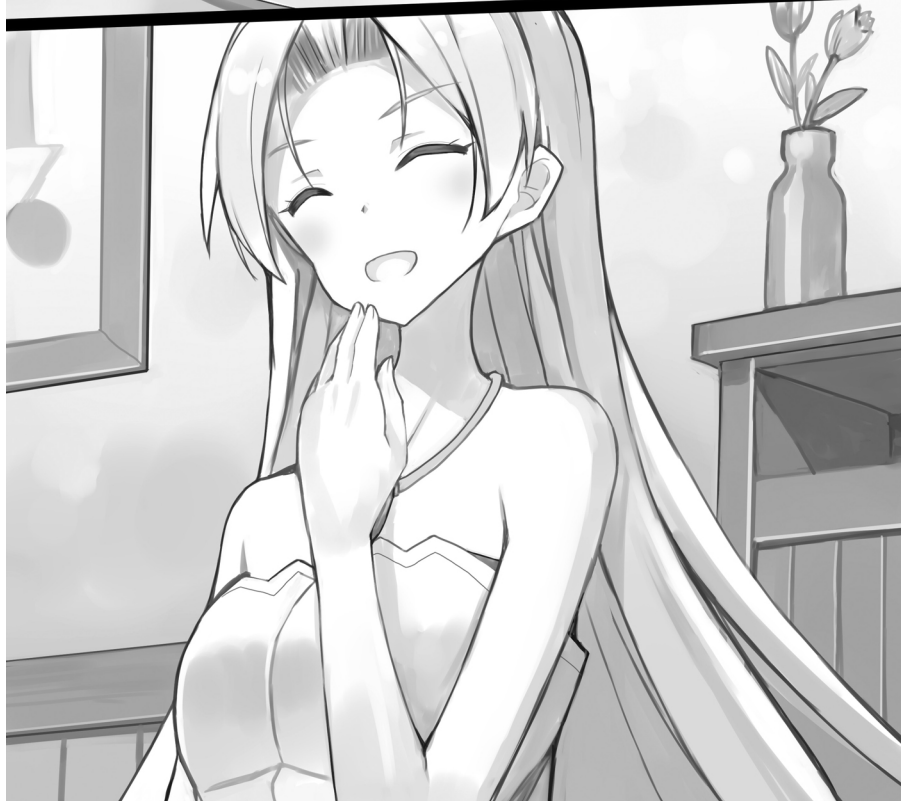
"Indeed," the empress said, smiling too. Koutarou's weighty sense of responsibility touched her, as it was something she shared. So she was especially relieved to see him smile again.

"So, did you put your heart into this tea?" Koutarou asked, glancing down at his cup again. If he put his feelings into his sword, he was sure Elfaria put hers into her tea. Was it mere passion for tea that had inspired this cup? Or was it a simple wish to entertain an old friend? He wanted to know exactly what she'd been thinking and feeling when she made it.

"You could say it was a desire for revenge over being left behind twenty years ago," Elfaria said with a mischievous grin that reminded him of her teenage self. Nostalgia gripped his heart when he saw it.

"Scary. Can't you please forgive me already?" Koutarou laughed. Elfaria joked around like this occasionally to tease him, and he presumed that was all she was doing now too.

"I think not. I'll choose to hold it against you for a little while longer, Layous-sama," said Elfaria. She was still grinning mischievously, further leading Koutarou to think she was only kidding.



“Well, you can open up to me whenever you’re ready,” Koutarou offered.

“If I do, it would only trouble you...” Elfaria replied.

“Hmm? Why?”

“When the time comes, I’ll tell you everything.”

“Sure.”

The heart of a woman was a mystery to Koutarou—especially Elfaria’s. All he could intuit was that Elfaria was purposefully avoiding telling him something. Chalking it up to the ways of an older woman, he smiled and brought his cup to his lips.

“The tea here really does taste different from the tea on Earth... Maybe it’s a matter of what people have put into them too,” he mused, thinking of the techniques and traditions of both planets.

There were variations between the two, right down to the plants they used. They were both still considered tea, but they’d evolved independently in different galaxies, resulting in nuances between them. Nevertheless, their taste and aroma were comparable. The difference between them was only as subtle as the difference between various types of teas on Earth. That said, the differences were pronounced to a trained palate. Forthorthian tea was characterized by its fruity aftertaste, for example. There was also the matter of how the tea was made, and Koutarou was particularly appreciative of Elfaria’s skill with it.

“Which do you prefer?” she happily asked, curious about Koutarou’s tastes.

“Couldn’t say. All the tea you make is good.”

Elfaria put her heart and soul into her tea, just the way Koutarou poured himself into his swordsmanship. It didn’t matter the blend or brew. As long as she made it, Koutarou would enjoy it.

This unexpected response left the empress speechless.

“What is it?” Koutarou asked, giving her a mystified look.

“Oh, it’s nothing.”

“If you say so.”

“Good grief, you’re so...”

A warm feeling, both gentle and strong, blossomed in Elfaria’s chest. She feared she might burst into tears if she wasn’t careful. Of course, the man responsible was perfectly unaware. His eyes had already wandered to the packages of tea.

“You have all kinds here. We should try this one too, Elle.”

“Yes... I’ll go make some right away.”

Elfaria had her complaints, but she instead chose to enjoy her teatime with Koutarou. That was what the warm feeling in her chest was telling her to do, and it would help make the feeling last a little

longer.

Afterword

Long time no see everyone, Takehaya here. It's been roughly six months since volume 40 went on sale, which is a longer wait than usual. Sorry for making anyone worry. Please allow me to explain what happened.

In truth, something strange happened at the end of last year. My vision got worse and everything started looking whiter. It was minor at first and I'd only just changed glasses, so I thought it was my imagination, but after a while, I began noticing distinct changes while driving. It became harder to see lit signs in my rearview and mirrors at intersections. Since that kind of thing can be dangerous, I stopped driving and went to an eye doctor. And to my surprise, the diagnosis was cataracts. You know, those things that old people get.

Cataracts are where the lens of your eye becomes cloudy, preventing light from reaching the retina. It's like wearing sunglasses with white lenses. It's faint at first but gradually gets worse, causing your vision to deteriorate. When light passes through the lens, the cloudy white areas diffuse it, making it seem very bright. I'm still only in my late forties, so the diagnosis was quite a shock. But according to the doctor, even younger folks can get cataracts. It can happen as a complication of diabetes, but I have no problems with my blood sugar, so that wasn't my case. Another cause can be strain from poor vision. I've been nearsighted and reliant on glasses since junior high, and nowadays I work staring into a computer every day, so that could be my issue. Now, there are also people who are simply predisposed to developing cataracts. That may also be the case with me. The doctor suspected the cause was either that, strain, or both.

When I got my diagnosis, I immediately decided to have surgery. Medicine can slow the worsening of cataracts but not cure them. The end result is blindness, so surgery is a must. The question was when to have it. My symptoms were still on the lighter side and didn't interfere with my work, but I was looking at more work (unrelated to novels) at the start of the year, so there was a sense of urgency because it generally takes about six months for your eyes to recover. My condition also made driving dangerous. Since I live in a quiet area, away from highways and downtown areas, giving up driving would be difficult. And so I decided to have the surgery as soon as volume 40 was done.

There were some tests before the surgery and I took some time to get ready, so the actual surgery took place around the time the book was released. To summarize the procedure, they pierce your eye and remove the vitreous humor before replacing it with a substitute. The technology is so advanced, however, that it only takes fifteen minutes for a single eye. Doing both at the same time would have left me completely unable to see, so I did my right eye first and my left eye one week later. After a week, you can take the patch off your eye. Fortunately both operations went well, but that was where the real difficulties began.

The first problem was bathing. Small or not, I'd had holes put in both my eyes, so I couldn't get water in them. Because of that, I couldn't bathe for roughly a week after surgery. And since I staggered my surgeries by a week, I couldn't really take a bath for two weeks. I remember washing myself vigorously the day before and on the morning of the second surgery. Then again a week later.

The next problem was medication. I had an oral prescription for antibiotics and painkillers that I only took for a few days. But the eye drops continued for three months while the wound completely closed. I had three types of eye drops, both antibacterial and anti-inflammatory, one of which I had to use twice a day, and the other two I had to use three times a day. I'm forgetful enough as is, so keeping up with three eye drops meant I made mistakes about which to use. Since that can cause inflammation, I eventually made a checklist.

The third problem was my glasses. My wounds healed roughly two weeks after the surgery, and I was told that I could work and drive again after that. However, my vision wouldn't stabilize until about a month out, and then I'd have to wait for new glasses. So the question was how to work for three weeks without new glasses. I had no choice but to use a magnifying glass to muddle through and cope as best I could. And that's why volume 41 was delayed. Fortunately, after I got new glasses I was able to work again, although it was a little hard to see. Of course, my vision still isn't perfect. My eyes won't fully stabilize for half a year after the surgery, so I'll need new glasses again. I've started getting used to the condition of my eyes, so once I get new glasses, I should be able to work like normal. So while I'm working now, there's a chance volume 42 will be off schedule.

That's also in part because volume 41 wasn't released as planned. We need to schedule carefully so as not to put an unnecessary load on Poco-san and the proofreaders and the reviewers. We're working that out, so I can't say when volume 42 *will* come out, but once it does, I believe we'll get back to our regular pace. I ask for your support.

Incidentally, volume 40 also ended up going on sale a month later

than usual, but that was simply because the production line couldn't keep up with the additional half-length novel (currently on sale to rave reviews on BookWalker) that was released as part of the volume 40 celebration. It had nothing to do with cataracts.

Now then, with that complicated topic out of the way, let's move on to discussing the volume. Koutarou and the others are back in Forthorthe with the goal of either apprehending or defeating Ralgwin. But there's much afoot, so the entire country's in an uproar. And in the midst of everything, a report comes in about a stronghold of Ralgwin's. The spotlight this time is on Ruth, who finally gets to bare her fangs. When in Forthorthe, she can really unleash her information processing and operational talents to their fullest, making something extraordinary happen. But you'll have to read the book to find out what!

As for those of you who have already read it, what did you think of Ruth? If I were a villain, I would no doubt go after her first. Then there's Kiriha and Clan. The three of them are light on combat abilities but their strengths are broadly applicable, making them powerful in all kinds of situations. That's why I'd target them. And I'm sure Ralgwin is thinking the same thing, so the fight from here on out will probably be about protecting them.

Yurika's kind of the opposite. She can do anything with magic, yes, but only on a limited scale. That makes it harder for her to have big moments in bigger fights. Maybe I should give her a strategic spell. But if I do that for her, I'll have to revisit the other girls too. I'll have to think about it... Wait a minute. Yurika really got to shine this time too (lol).

To wrap up, I'd like to touch a little on the next volume. Ralgwin has suffered some serious losses, but he's not the type to shrink back because of that. Feeling his back up against a wall, he decides to take drastic measures against the royal families and the Blue Knight. Ralgwin's subordinate Fasta then makes contact with Koutarou. What is Ralgwin after? And what is Fasta doing? Find out in the next volume, which is planned for early 2023. Normally there'd be a *Hercules* volume at the end of the year, but with the schedule being set back because of my eye surgery, we'll be continuing with the main story. Please look forward to it.

Lastly, the acknowledgments. Thank you very much to HJ Bunko's editorial department and related companies for all of their hard work, Poco-san for the illustrations even when the schedule shifted, and all of you readers for waiting for this volume to come out. Let us meet again in the afterword for volume 42.

Article 35

The signatory parties of the Corona Convention hereby swear that they will not use marriage for political or diplomatic purposes.

Article 35 Postscript

We don't have to do this because Koutarou would absolutely refuse anyway. Sanae, this is more of a preemptive agreement that we'll band together against Elfaria-san if she tries to pull anything of the sort.



Corona Convention

New!

October 4th, 2011

Bonus Short Stories

Ruth

During the years Harumi suffered from a weak constitution, she'd developed an aversion to large crowds and events involving too many people. That persisted even now.

"You want to celebrate Halloween...?" she asked dubiously.

Harumi had never done much for the holiday—a family photo shoot with witch hats or carved pumpkins. But this was bigger. A faction within room 106 was pushing to celebrate Halloween for real, and they wanted Harumi in on the fun.

"Yeah!" shouted Sanae. "It's an excuse to keep messing with people until they give you candy!"

"Aren't you *not* supposed to trick them if they give you candy?" Harumi asked, still dubious.

"Wait, really?"

"I do believe so, yes."

Sanae was in charge of recruiting Harumi for the Halloween effort, but there was a fatal flaw in this plan, for Sanae only had a loose grasp on the holiday herself.

"C'mon! Whenever I see Koutarou, I always jump on his back, squeeze his cheeks, and tickle his sides before we even say anything," Sanae insisted.

"You're the only one who does that, Higashihongan-san! Everyone else *starts* with talking!" Harumi protested.

"What? But Theia and Koutarou get straight to wrestling."

"Theiamillis-san is the only one who does that!"

"So why don't you greet him with a trick of your own, Harumi?"

"Y-You want me to play a trick on him?! Without warning?!"

Harumi went wide-eyed. She couldn't stand the thought of doing anything rude or uncalled for, and she couldn't imagine being mischievous for her own pleasure.

"You can do it," Sanae said. "Just hassle Koutarou as soon as you see him!"

"I could never..."

"Nuh-uh! I've seen you sic Snoozy on him."

"I can only do that because Snoozy is the one doing the hassling! Doing it myself would be too much..."

"Hmm..." Sanae folded her arms, looking pensive. Then, after a

few seconds, she pointed emphatically at Harumi. "You're gonna be in real trouble later with that attitude!"

"I'll be in trouble? How?"

"You wanna date Koutarou too, right?"

"Er, well... Yes, I do." Overwhelmed by Sanae's straightforward question, Harumi turned red. That was indeed the future she was hoping for, but discussing it was delicate.

"So how are you gonna kiss him like that?" Sanae asked next.

"What? I..." Harumi turned an even deeper shade of red. The mere thought of kissing the boy she loved flustered her thoroughly.

"Are you planning on just emitting that 'kiss me' aura and leaving it up to Koutarou? Are you gonna make him do all the work?"

"Ah..." Harumi finally realized what Sanae was getting at. She was trying to say that it wasn't fair to be passive in a two-way relationship, and Harumi couldn't argue with that. "I suppose that wouldn't be good, would it?"

"Right. So you should try being playful with him for Halloween."

"P-Playful, huh?" Harumi took Sanae's words to heart. She understood that any further development in her relationship with Koutarou would require action on her part. So, after thinking for a moment, she hesitantly replied, "Okay, I'll give it a try."

"Attagirl!"

And so, Harumi decided to team up with Sanae and the others for some Halloween trickery.

Maki

With Halloween approaching, the cosclub of Harukaze High was astir. Making costumes for Halloween was their time to shine. It was a grand occasion perfectly situated between their big summer and winter events.

"I wish I'd already decided on a costume like you, Aika-san," the club president said with a sigh.

"Huh?" Maki asked, surprised.

"You and Yurika-chan are going to be magical girls, right?"

"Oh, right," Maki replied noncommittally with a grin. She could laugh about it now, but she and Yurika had been forced to pose as cosplayers in the past. And to this day, the rest of the cosclub still believed they were big fans of magical girls.

"You even have a kitten this year, don't you?" the president asked Maki. "You've got *everything*."

"You need to come up with something for yourself too," Maki reminded her. "It's almost October already."

Yurika was absent from the club meeting because of her part-time

job, but the rest of the cosclub was busy working away on their Halloween costumes. Except for the president, that is. She was still struggling to decide on a costume.

“What do you think would suit me, Aika-san?” she asked.

“Let’s see... You’re on the shorter side, so I think you should go for something cute,” Maki replied.

“If only I were as tall as the former club president, I could do all kinds of costumes... But my options are kinda limited.” The new club president longed to dress up elegantly, but her stature made cuter styles and costumes a better fit. That discrepancy was what had made deciding on an outfit so hard.

“I’m actually jealous of your height,” said Maki, who was on the tall side herself.

“Well, duh! It’s totally different when you have a boyfriend!” the president shouted.

“Th-That’s not what I...” Maki blushed. Deny it though she might, the president was right. Maki’s desire to be seen as cute was because of Koutarou.

“Come on, Aika-san. Just admit you have a boyfriend.”

“Kyah, don’t tickle me there!”

“Is this your weak spot?! Coochie coo!”

“Ahahaha, okay, okay! I’ll tell you everything!”

Maki ultimately caved to the president’s forceful negotiation and dished on Koutarou. The ears of the other members perked up, and they surrounded the two girls, keen to hear more. Work on costumes was completely paused for the time being. Everyone’s heads were now filled with thoughts of romance. After all, they were teenage girls.

“So, how far have you gone with Satomi-san?” one member asked.

“U-Um... Only holding hands,” a slightly overwhelmed Maki answered.

“What about kissing? Have you kissed yet?”

“O-Only on the cheek, really... But Satomi-kun said we need things to be clear.”

“Whoooooaaaa, the will-they-or-won’t-they is the best part!”

“I’m so jealous! I want to experience that for myself!”

“That’s a load of crap! Just make him yours already!”

“You’ve all got it wrong! We cosplayers should have nothing to do with this excruciating real-life romance!”

After hearing what Maki said, the cosclub girls began arguing about love. But as they were all young and influenced by various ideas and fantasies of romance, it was a very lively and interesting conversation. Some of the girls disagreed on points, making for an animated debate between them.

“Goodness... Heehee.”

In the end, the cosclub forgot all about cosplay. But Maki didn't mind. This, too, was part of the everyday life she'd fought so hard for—the light that had drawn her out of the darkness. She simply watched on with a smile.

Nalfa

Nalfa was dressed up as a witch to make a video about Halloween for the people back home in Forthorthe. It would be a part of the series she'd been producing since arriving on Earth.

"That really looks good on you, Nal-chan," said Kotori.

"Don't you think it's too flashy?" Nalfa asked, looking down nervously at her black and orange dress.

Kotori shook her head with a smile. "That's what makes it so great. Halloween is all about being flashy."

"But why? Is there some reason behind it?"

"Halloween was originally a harvest festival, but since it falls at the end of the season when ancestral and evil spirits return, people started dressing up to prevent evil spirits from playing tricks on them."

"I see... So it used to be a harvest festival," Nalfa mused, smiling to herself.

Kotori gave her a curious look and turned the camera on her. "Do you have any fond memories of harvest festivals?" she asked.

"I used to go to them with my brother. We never dressed up, but it's traditional for girls to play princess."

"How come?"

"The story goes that, two thousand years ago when she was a princess, Empress Alaia snuck out to dance at the harvest festival with the Blue Knight. That's where it comes from," Nalfa explained. She waxed sentimental over the thought of the harvest festival not just because of nostalgia for her childhood days with her brother, but also because it reminded her of the legend of the Blue Knight.

"That was really Kou-niisan, right?"

"Yes, I believe so."

"Then let's go!"

"Where?"

"To Kou-niisan, obviously! It would be a waste not to film you with him!"

"Kotori, we can't just pull him into a video without asking!"

"Just go along with it! We're gonna get record views with this one!"

"Kotori, please listen to meeeee!"

An excited Kotori proceeded to drag Nalfa over to room 106. The

two apartments were connected by a hole in the wall, so they were there in no time. Nalfa was already standing in front of Koutarou before she could even process what was happening.

“Kou-niisan, Kou-niisan!” Kotori called out to him.

“Oh, hey. What’s up, Kin-chan? Why are you looking at me like that? And why’s Nalfa-san dressed up like that?”

“Is it true that you went to a harvest festival two thousand years ago?” Kotori asked without stopping to answer any of his questions.

“Ah, I get it. Halloween made you think of that, huh?” Koutarou replied. “Yeah, I did. It was in a town in the countryside, though, so it wasn’t all that big.”

“Apparently it’s become a harvest festival tradition to this day!” Kotori practically shouted.

“What?” Wide-eyed, Koutarou cocked his head to the side. He had no idea what Kotori was talking about.

“I’m saying that you sneaking out on a harvest festival date with the princess started something! Now the girls sneak out and pretend to be princesses!”

“So the whole world realized it was her? I guess there was no point in Her Majesty using a fake name...”

“No, people only found out after Empress Alaia’s passing. She wrote about it in her diary, so no one caught her. She revealed it herself,” Nalfa clarified.

“So in Forthorthe, you’re as iconic for harvest festivals as pumpkins are for Halloween here,” Kotori continued, still filming. She now had Koutarou and Nalfa in her witch costume in the viewfinder.

“I’m as iconic as pumpkins, huh?” said Koutarou. “I guess I like that more than being made out to be a hero.”

“You’re that too! You’re iconic *because* you’re a hero, Koutarou-sama!” Nalfa proclaimed.

“So, Mr. Jack-o’-Lantern, what do you think of Miss Witch here?”

“She looks good. Nalfa-san’s hair shines like a rainbow, so this mysterious vibe really suits her.”

“Isn’t that great, Nal-chan?”

“Th-Thank you very much...” Nalfa felt bashful, but she welcomed any compliment from Koutarou. She blushed and flashed a small smile.

At that, Kotori whispered into her ear, “Let’s go with a princess outfit next year!”

“Kotori, th-that’s... um...”

Nalfa was at a loss for words. Kotori had caught her completely off guard... but it *was* a desirable proposal. She couldn’t bring herself to agree readily, but she also couldn’t say no.

“What was that?” Koutarou asked, curious what they were

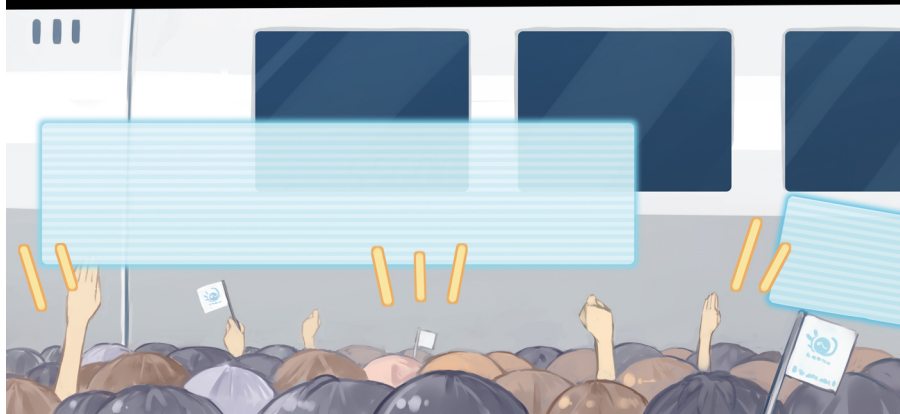
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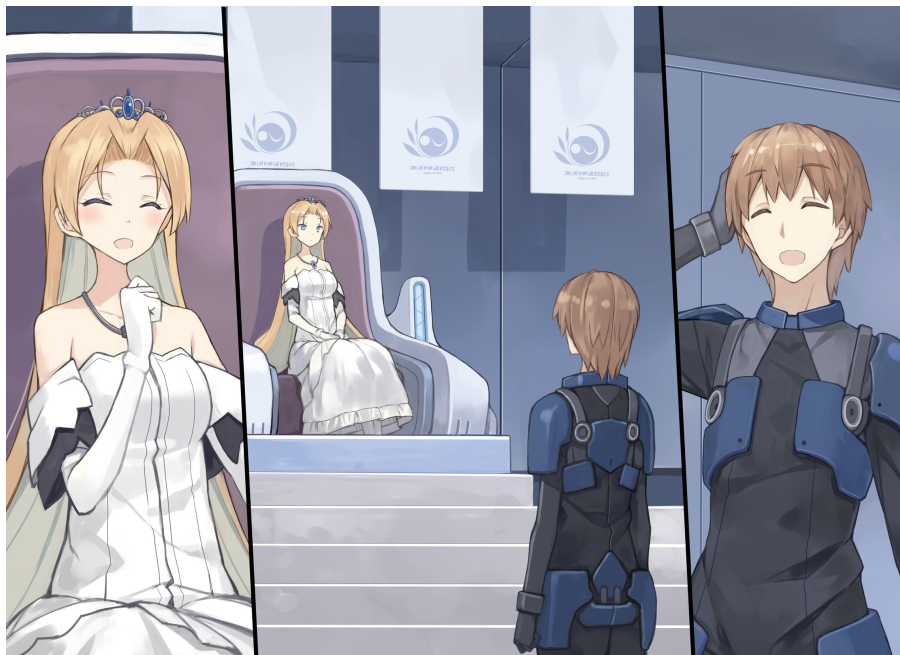
“A secret! We won’t even tell you, Kou-niisan,” Kotori insisted.

“Girls sure have a lot of those,” Koutarou muttered.

Unlike the cheerful Kotori and nonchalant Koutarou, Nalfa was growing more and more flustered. She had to cast her eyes downward, for she couldn’t even look Koutarou in the face right now.











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